

DEVELOPING A THEOLOGY OF **LEADERSHIP**

BY TONY MORGAN



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INTRODUCTION

A little while back, a friend of mine asked about some posts I had written about my theology of leadership. I figured if he was interested, others may be interested as well.

It's important to wrestle with this issue and understand how God defines leadership. Without a biblical perspective, I know that my leadership style can start to look more like the world's standard or that of other pastors instead of God's—and I want to make sure everything I'm doing is about mission, not about me.

In this eBook, I share what I have learned—and am still learning—about biblical leadership. I also challenge you to take a look at yourself and what motivates you in your leadership role. Through *Developing a Theology of Leadership*, I hope you not only clarify your approach to leadership, but you begin developing new leaders around you. Real leaders empower other leaders. If you are not multiplying yourself, you probably don't have the leadership gift.



PART ONE

BUILDING A FIRM FOUNDATION

Recently, I've been diving into the Scriptures to better understand a biblical perspective on leadership, because I want to make sure everything about me as a leader reflects Jesus. It's important to have a clear understanding of biblical leadership for a number of reasons.

First, I believe that leadership is a gift. It's among the spiritual gifts listed in Scripture: "If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously" (Romans 12:8 NLT). Preceding that thought, the Bible says, "God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well" (Romans 12:6 NLT). This suggests that some people have leadership abilities but others don't. We are all followers, but not all of us are leaders. Although everyone can learn leadership skills, not everyone is gifted to be a leader. One of the first questions you need to answer is this: Am I really a leader?

I also believe God has designed the church to have clear leadership roles and structure. For example, Scripture speaks of "the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers" (Ephesians 4:11 NLT). These are specific roles God designed for ministry. Then in passages such as 1 Timothy 3, we see defined leadership roles of elders and deacons. We are also called to respect the leadership structure God puts in place: "Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they are accountable to God" (Hebrews 13:17 NLT).

We all need to wrestle with our theology of leadership because God has gifted some to be leaders. Not only has He defined leadership roles in the church, He has also expressly defined how leaders are supposed to act. Frankly, sometimes I see a gap between God's design for leadership and how we (including myself) live out our leadership roles.

In Mark 7:8-9, Jesus warns religious leaders about committing themselves to the instructions of God's Word rather than the traditions of man. I've heard some press on the fact that in the modern church we tend to look too closely to marketplace leadership for cues to how we should lead in the church. That's probably a fair argument. Not all successful leadership is biblical leadership. However, I do see business leaders using leadership principles taught in Scripture, whether they know it or not.

It is true that we church leaders can learn from business leaders, but the corporate world should not set the foundation from which we lead. We can also learn from fellow church leaders, but they are also human and don't provide a perfect model for biblical leadership. When we look to other leaders, we are essentially holding on to our traditions rather than embracing the truth about leadership found in God's Word. The Bible needs to become our filter for truth in every area of our life and ministry. Just because we see other leaders doing it doesn't mean that's how God designed it.

So, I ask you: What's your theology of leadership? If you're like me, it'll continually be shifting in some respects as you come to a clearer understanding of God's Word and how it applies to your life and ministry. You are not becoming the leader God designed you to be, however, if you are only learning about leadership from the books you read, the people you watch, and your experiences along the way. These resources can be valuable in shaping our leadership if they are supported by biblical principles.

We need to wrestle with this issue and try to understand how God defines leadership. I hope you'll join me on this journey to discover these answers together.

PART TWO

SERVANT LEADERSHIP



Leaders are servants. It's counterintuitive. Servant leadership sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it? It may be unlike the leadership you've experienced in the marketplace ... or even the church for that matter. But biblical leaders cannot be anything but servant leaders.

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

1 Peter 5:2–3 (NIV)

It's interesting that of all the roles outside the church, God chose the shepherd to be the model of leadership within the church. When you think business titan or political leader, you probably don't think of someone herding sheep. God's way is different, though. He wants leaders who are ready to serve. He wants people who will not lord their leadership powers over those entrusted to their care.

Jesus, of course, was the perfect example of embracing and championing this servant leader approach. Here's what he had to share:

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Matthew 20:25–28 (NIV)

Clearly Jesus is teaching a distinction between a style of leadership that is authoritative and one that is focused on serving others. You wouldn't typically think leaders are first servers, but that's how Jesus designed it.

Most of what makes us a servant leader is our attitude toward ourselves and others. Paul explained it like this:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than

yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Philippians 2:3–4 (NIV)

The key to servant leadership is having an attitude of humility. Rather than focusing on our ambitions and our own interests, Paul suggests we first consider the interests of others. Here's what I know about the interests of others: they're sometimes different from mine. It takes a confident yet humble leader to follow God's calling in his or her own life while also considering the interests of others around them. We have to live in that tension in order to experience God's design for the church. That's how we accomplish his purposes.

The church needs a new kind of leader. That's the way God designed it. And that's what he demands of those who are called to lead others. This isn't just a model for church leadership—this is a model for how we are to interact with people all around us.



PART THREE EMPOWERMENT

I'm still a big proponent of clear mission, vision, and strategy in churches. This clarity leads to a unified effort, which results in ministry impact. Clarity about *who* we are, *where* we're going and *how* we're going to get there also provides great freedom and empowerment for people to be who God created them to be. I've heard it described as freedom within a framework. That's essentially a picture of the Christian faith. There's actually more freedom for us if we stay within God's designed framework. Leaders who empower the people around them believe:

- It's less about the leader and more about our God-given mission.
- It's less about the leader and more about those being led.
- It's less about the leader and more about synergy of the body.

Paul described the responsibility of leaders in the church this way:

Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

Ephesians 4:12–13 (NLT)

That's what I mean about leadership being less about the leader and more about those being led. Our role as leaders is to "equip God's people to do his work." The leader doesn't do the work—God's people do His work. God's people don't do the leader's work—they do God's work.

We see this reflected in Paul's writings on spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 as well. Each believer is given one or more gifts. Paul uses the human body as a metaphor to express how the various parts of the body of Christ are indispensable. In other words, we church leaders have failed if we have not embraced the unique gift-mix that God designed. And, we won't fully know the power and impact of the local church until people are empowered to be who God wired them to be.

We as church leaders don't tell people what to do to accomplish the mission. Instead, we help people discover their spiritual giftedness and free them to use these gifts to fulfill the mission. It's not delegation, because with delegation I'm still responsible. It's empowerment. Someone else is responsible, but as a leader I still hold them accountable.

In the Old Testament, we see this play out when Jethro tells his son-in-law Moses:

Select from all the people some capable, honest men who fear God and hate bribes. Appoint them as leaders over groups of one thousand, one hundred, fifty, and ten.

Exodus 18:21 (NLT)

In the New Testament, we see this demonstrated when Paul instructs Timothy:

You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others.

2 Timothy 2:2 (NLT)

We see this model of leadership throughout the Bible where people entrust others with the responsibilities of carrying on the ministry. Leadership isn't leadership if it isn't released to others.

It's so contradictory isn't it? We've been so conditioned to equate leadership with a person. Yet, that's not how God created it. In God's design, the sum is greater than its parts. Leadership doesn't rest with one individual, it's entrusted to capable men and women.

PART FOUR CHARACTER



Leadership is less about the words or actions of the leader and more about the character of the leader. That's the conclusion I've reached after revisiting what the Bible has to say about leadership within the church. For example, we can look at a handful of passages and come to this "job description" for leaders:

- Encourage others. (Romans 14:19)
- Set an example with your speech, life, and faith. (1 Timothy 4:12)
- Remain pure. (1 Timothy 4:12)
- Embrace humility and gentleness. (Ephesians 4:2)
- Promote peace and unity. (Ephesians 4:3)
- Avoid arguments and quarreling. (2 Timothy 2:24)
- Gently instruct others. (2 Timothy 2:25)
- Maintain emotional control. (Titus 2:6)
- Demonstrate integrity in your actions and speech. (Titus 2:7–8)
- Live your life above reproach. (1 Timothy 3:2)

It's not the job description you would expect to see for a leadership position, is it? When you think about today's leaders in politics and business—and even the church—these attributes don't typically come to mind first.

Leadership outside the church often looks different from what God intended it to be inside the church. That may explain some of the differences between the "job description" above and what we routinely see in the marketplace.

Ironically, though, in the business bestseller *Good to Great*, Jim Collins said his research seemed to infer that business leaders would do well to model this biblical approach to leadership. Collins said every good-to-great company studied was led by what he describes as a Level 5 leader, stating:

Those who worked with or wrote about the good-to-great leaders continually used words like quiet, humble, modest, reserved, shy, gracious, mild-mannered, self-effacing, understated, did not believe his own clippings; and so forth.

It's interesting how similar that list is to the "job description" above. Neither list reflects the larger-than-life leadership that we tend to expect from people in these positions. And that, of course, challenges me to think about my own leadership. I may be gifted to lead, but my character will determine the ongoing impact of my leadership. That's something that can't be measured in an interview or through a personality profile or on a resume. Character is proven over a lifetime.



PART FIVE

PUT IT INTO ACTION

Teaching and reading can shift thinking, but I'm a big proponent of establishing new systems and strategies to shift behaviors. With that in mind, let me propose this action plan to develop your "theology of leadership" so you can begin developing new leaders around you.

1. **Identify growing leaders.** Don't broadcast this opportunity. Invite people through one-on-one conversations. Find people who are already influencing others.
2. **Gather the group.** Don't meet with growing leaders individually—do it in a group. Learning is always better when it's interactive and in community with others.
3. **Establish an end date.** Meet once a month for a pre-established time period (6 months, 8 months, or a full year), identifying when mentoring ends and putting knowledge into action begins.
4. **Start with the Bible.** Use this eBook to begin a conversation about the biblical design for leadership. Use this as an opportunity to talk about healthy spiritual disciplines.
5. **Read through one leadership book each month.** Stay focused. This mentoring group is about leadership development. What tools do future ministry leaders need?
6. **Talk about current leadership challenges.** Use "pressure points" at the workplace, at home, and in ministry to shape the conversation each month.\
7. **Multiply the group.** Challenge every person to repeat the previous six steps with another group of growing leaders.

Over time you'll find this investment in other leaders will actually help you grow as a leader as well. Also, to put this bluntly, if you are not intentionally mentoring other leaders, you are not leading like Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Leadership is not easy, but hopefully you now realize how often we make it harder than it should be. With the right focus on Jesus as the greatest leader of all time and a firm foundation in Scripture, you will gain significant clarity and experience leadership success that will impact your life and everyone with whom you come in contact.

I hope you have gained a new perspective on biblical leadership—but more important, I hope you have a greater understanding of your own leadership style and what you can do to better align it with God’s purpose for your life and ministry.

Next, check out the discussion questions that follow to further explore this concept on your own as well as with your leadership team.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- When people consider who you are as a leader, why would they think “servant” first? If they don’t, why not?
- How do you exemplify the character of a leader?
- In what ways do you sometimes lord over those in your care?
- When do you find yourself pursuing your own ambitions before the interests of others?
- How does a clear vision offer freedom within a framework?
- Would you say your leadership is more about getting people to do what you want them to do, or about helping people be who God designed them to be?
- If you were to leave your church today, would the ministry continue to grow without you?

ABOUT TONY MORGAN



Tony was the Founder and Lead Strategist of The Unstuck Group. Started in 2009, The Unstuck Group has served over 700 churches throughout the United States and several countries around the world. Previously, Tony served on the senior leadership teams of three rapidly growing churches including NewSpring Church in South Carolina. He has five published books, including *The Unstuck Church*, and, with Amy Anderson, he hosted the The Unstuck Church Podcast which has thousands of listeners each month.

He was married to Emily for more than twenty-five years, and they have four kids: Kayla, Jacob, Abby, and Brooke. Tony passed away in 2024, leaving behind a legacy of thought leadership, innovation, and a deep commitment to helping churches thrive. To learn more about Tony and The Unstuck Group, visit:.

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