

Four Traits That Define Christian Leadership

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Acts

The last eight chapters of Acts present an action-packed account of Paul's trials, including an attempt on his life, imprisonment, and a harrowing journey to Rome. The aspect of these chapters most relevant to work is the depiction of Paul's leadership. Four traits characterize Paul's leadership: his courage, his suffering, his respect for others, and his concern for others' well being.

1) Paul's Courage.

Paul receives threats of imprisonment and death. Yet through it all, Paul continues his work and even dares to preach to his captors. In the end, his courage proves decisive in saving the lives of hundreds of people in the midst of a shipwreck.

The point, however, is not that Paul is a man of extraordinary courage, but that the Holy Spirit gives each of us the courage we need to do our work. Paul credits the Holy Spirit for keeping him going in the face of adversity. This is an encouragement to us today, because we also can depend on the Holy Spirit to give us the courage we lack. The danger is not so much that courage may fail us in a moment of terror, but that general worry will deter us from taking even the first step into following God at work. How often do we fail to defend a colleague, serve a customer, challenge a boss, or

Speak up about an issue, not because we are under actual pressure, but because we are afraid that we might offend someone?

2) Paul's Suffering

Paul is kidnapped, interrogated, ridiculed, shipwrecked and bitten by a viper. Leadership in a broken world entails suffering. Paul embraces bodily suffering, along with many other forms, as the necessity of being a leader in the way God intends. Leadership cannot benefit others if the leader will not accept hurt to a greater or lesser degree. And if leadership does not benefit others, it is not God's kind of leadership.

3) Paul's Respect

Despite Paul's utter conviction that he is in the right about both his beliefs and his conduct, he shows respect for everyone he encounters. For example, he speaks respectfully to a crowd that has just beaten him, to a soldier who is about to flog him, and to the Jewish council that accuses him in court. Paul's respect for others often wins him a hearing and even turns enemies into friends. The centurion about to flog him intervenes with the Roman tribune, who orders Paul released. Yet we should not confuse the respect Paul shows others with timidity about his message. Paul never shrinks from boldly proclaiming the truth, whatever the consequences. Not everyone returns Paul's respect. Some vilify, reject, threaten, and abuse him. But the exercise of true respect is much more likely to earn a response of true respect.

4) Paul's Concern for Others

Paul accepts the burden of leadership not to make his life better, but to make others' lives better. His very willingness to travel to hostile places to preach a better way of life is proof enough of this. Yet we also see his concern for others in concrete, personal ways. During the shipwreck, although his warning not to make the voyage had been ignored, he encourages the crew and passengers with the promise that their life will be spared. He makes sure everyone eats to keep up their strength. And he devises a plan that will save everyone's life, including those who can't swim.

Acts chapters 20-27 contains one of the Bible's most stirring demonstrations of leadership. Paul's courage, suffering, respect, and concern for others remain as much of an example for us today as they did when these chapters were written.