

Utilitarian Relational Leadership: The Myth!

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Consider a church brochure asking you to serve as part of a ministry team. “Welcome to X church, where your service and value are only as good as your production. If you are interested in growing the program please sign up in the back of the sanctuary.” This seems unbelievable and completely fictitious. Yet, if you were to analyze local church ministry and the unspoken/spoken leadership philosophy you might be surprised. By buying into consumerism, the American Church leadership has fallen prey to the commodification of humanity and a utilitarian use of people in the name of bigger and better programs. In the process it has left behind the life-breathing relational nature of its God and its people.¹ This problem is significant because people are dying void of dignity and purpose inside and outside our churches. In the process of becoming attractive, leaders in the church have commodified human identity, and are in need of a revisiting of Trinitarian leadership. This paper will briefly analyze the problem of consumerism, which focuses on the commodification of human value and the subsequent turn to utilitarian use of humanity. The latter half of the paper will provide a two-part solution to this problem: the Triune relationality of God as it impacts the value of humanity and its subsequent impact on leadership philosophy.

The Value Problem

In the latter half of the 20th century, with the overwhelming rise of consumerism, the church turned to the economic world in order to be relevant. This is a world where success and vision are measurable numbers and value takes on a new meaning. Value is determined by an item’s usefulness in perpetuating or fulfilling the vision.

At this point, Vincent Miller’s analysis of Karl Marx’s description of the symptoms will be helpful in pointing out how some leadership philosophies have made commodities out of people. Marx addresses the free-market mindset, which sees value only in the exchange of objects; people are items that produce products, which are exchanged for resources. Marx describes the alienation of people based on consumerism as having two characteristics. First, objectification describes how work produced by the worker does not, in the end, remain with the

¹ This is a generalization based on experience and research and may not apply to each and every church, but do not allow that to be an excuse to turn away from self-reflection.

worker but rather the employer. Second, objectification leads to a break down between effort and creativity that hinders self-realization.² Marx is describing a labor philosophy that breaks down the individual to a cog in a system where his or her value is purely determined by his or her ability to produce.

One might question why Marx is brought into the process of investigating a problem with church leadership? The descriptions Marx had for the effects of consumerism are exceedingly clear and accurate. Let us take a moment and consider some modern Christian ministry language. In George Barna's book on church marketing he lays out the church growth process in terms of "product, price, place, and promotion." A new convert is called to the product (relationships) and then encouraged to go and build new relationships in order to perpetuate the cycle of growth. The "price" someone pays is the commitment to Christ.³ To look at this model of church growth one can see the value structure built into it. The value of a person is externally determined as an exchange of price and product. The impact of a consumer mentality is directly related to the way we look at one another, even in the context of the church. This fact is significant whether the ministry's free-market approach is intentional or not.

If the goal is to promote the kingdom of God by building the best and most attractive ministry, then there are certain characteristics that might befall that endeavor. As stated above this system of growth tends to commodify spirituality and people. The commodification of human identity and the Christian faith ultimately leads to utilitarianism. Unfortunately, some leaders see commodification as a necessity for advancement and achievement. Ted Haggard exemplifies this point by suggesting that, "everything, including spirituality, can be understood as a commodity."⁴ If all is seen as a commodity then value is determined purely upon the usefulness of the object being used. At this point we must consider the implications of commodification as it relates to a utilitarian approach to ministry leadership.

² Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion* (London: Continuum, 2005), 35-37.

³ George Barna, *Step by Step Guide for Church Marketing* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1992), 24-25.

⁴ Ted Haggard, quoted by Jeff Sharlet, "Inside America's Most Powerful Megachurch," *Harper's Magazine* 310.1860 (May 2005): 48.

Loss of Value = Utilitarianism

The ethical philosophy of utilitarianism says that people have no value outside of their usefulness in advancing the good of the majority.⁵ As one loving grandfather stated in an article about his disabled granddaughter and the effects of utilitarian paradigms, “The worth of a single human life is not in the equation for utilitarians if that life gets in the way of increasing the well-being and happiness or reducing the suffering of the community.”⁶ This view of people has crept its way into church leadership because of the strong reliance on consumer strategy and the commodification of human identity. Often in churches we are looking for people who will fit specific roles for the advancement of the program and we ignore those who appear to have nothing to offer the program.

The utilitarian approach to leadership is subtle and easily couched in spiritual language. A ministry leader crafts a vision and the people are asked to “jump on board” and “own the vision.” If the commodified person doesn’t “buy into the vision” then they are a useless piece in the system and often encouraged to “find a place that will meet their needs.” At this point the leader has categorized according to determined “value” and the potential for production.⁷

I should know this well because I’ve done and said these very things. In my ministry I see the need to recruit and develop people who can increase the ministry itself. I have targeted these people based on what they have to offer. If my initial analysis exhibits that a particular person has very little to offer I will spend less time interacting with that person. My desire to grow the ministry outweighs the desire to allow the Spirit to direct and lead through those who appear to have little “value.” To be honest I don’t think my confession is an isolated incident. Take for example the impact of someone like John Maxwell and his *21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*. His 20th rule is the Law of Explosive Growth which states that “leaders must use leaders math not followers math.” Put simply this means that a leader must assess the value of

⁵ Consulted: Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 2005).

⁶ John Buchanan, *Christian Century* 119.14 (7/3/2002): 3.

⁷ Paul Louis Metzger, *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 39-67.

those he seeks to lead. If a person is merely a follower then the value of that person is low; to pursue that person would decrease the overall explosive success.⁸

We must see the subtle ways in which we, as leaders, commodify people to the point of using those who are useful and disregarding those who lack “value.” This utilitarian approach to ministry is sucking the life out of volunteers and lay leadership, because we are using people to advance a program instead of using a program to help people grow. Our fear should be awakened as we consider the above examples and this argument from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “Utility wedded to blind voluntarism overestimates human willfulness and undermines humanity in the process.”⁹ Are we blindly leading in such a way that we ignore our own weaknesses and dehumanize the people we are attempting to lead? Our only hope is to repent and repeat after David:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23-24)

Restoring the Value of Humanity

In the battle against utilitarianism, Pope John Paul II laid a crucial cornerstone based on the *imago dei*. To strike at the heart of a philosophy that devalues the person for the good of the community one must turn to the nature of a God who infused creation with incomprehensible value. The former Pope believed that “each human being is unique and irreducible” because the *imago dei* allowed for freedom to “determine one’s character and understand oneself; which is only found in loving others in community.”¹⁰ At this point we turn to the community of the divine, the Trinity, and its profound implications on the value of mankind.

To begin to grasp the *imago dei* one must first begin a walk with the Triune God. The Trinity is a communion of persons that is best comprehended through *perichoresis*. Without taking away from the oneness or the distinction, “*perichoresis* preserved both the unity of the

⁸ John Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 208.

⁹ Jean Bethke Elshtain, “How Does-Or Should Theology Influence Politics?,” *Political Theology* 5.3 (July 2004): 270.

¹⁰ Derek Jeffreys, “Euthanasia and John Paul II’s ‘Silent Language of Profound Sharing of Affection’: Why Christians Should Care About Peter Singer,” in *Christian Bioethics* 7.3 (2001): 362.

one God and the individuality of the Trinitarian persons.”¹¹ The significance of this discussion is to show that the God who bestows his image upon creation is not an isolated individual, but rather exists communally (John 17). Not only does the Triune God exist communally He also creates/sustains communally (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). The product of this creative act is a humanity that is relational in nature and profoundly understood in community (Gen 1:26). To delve into these truths is to begin the process of recovering the inherent value of man.

There is still one more step that must be made to fully understand the value of man. “*God* shows no partiality to princes, nor regards the rich above the poor, for they all are the work of His hands.”(Job 34:19). This value is not portioned out to individuals according to their abilities or potential. Stanley Grenz adds this point: “By extending the divine image to humankind...declared that humankind, and not merely the king, is the representation of and witness to God on earth. In this way, the first creation narrative effects a universalizing of the divine image.”¹² Value is given to man equally through creation and it is the Creator who assesses it. This is directly in opposition to the value measurement found within utilitarian leadership. All humanity is created bearing the image of the relational God, and therefore each member of creation is seen as valuable in a community of mutuality and particularity. This truth of human value comes to us through our understanding of the Triune God, who also reveals to us important principles for leading His people of value.

A Trinitarian Proposal

I will now turn to a Trinitarian engagement of leadership that will counter the negative effects of utilitarianism/consumerism on the church body. There are three aspects of Trinitarian leadership that I acknowledge as crucial to effective leadership. The first is collaboration with the true and loving leader: the Spirit. The second is humility in the face of overwhelming forces that push for worldly success. The final is an invitational approach to people that honors their unique value while calling them to their communal responsibility.

¹¹ Stanley J. Grenz, “The Social God and the Relational Self: Toward a Trinitarian Theology of the *Imago Dei*,” in *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology*, Paul Louis Metzger, ed. (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 97.

¹² *Ibid*, 88-89.

First, to have a truly Trinitarian engagement of leadership one must see the way in which Christ, as an authoritative leader, was led.¹³ Christ is God and man united hypostatically; therefore it should be argued that none of his works were done outside his human capacity. Rick Richardson makes the point this way: “The key is not that Jesus is divine, but that Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴ The principle is that Christ, who is fully God, collaborates with the Spirit. His leadership is based on the will of the Father expressed through the motivation of the Spirit. The point is that Trinitarian leadership isn’t a one-man show. Too often leaders get caught up in the mechanical procedures that are thought to bring success, and often devalue people in the process. Darrell Guder comments on this point. “What we have lost in the ascendancy of technique is the openness to mystery and the understanding of God’s own inscrutable work in our midst.”¹⁵ Ministry is absolutely meaningless if it becomes a self-promoting program apart from dependence on the Lord’s leading. Treating people as commodities will be impossible if we are leading inherently valuable people as the Spirit fills us with the love of God (Rom. 5:5).

The second principle of Trinitarian leadership is humility. The temptation of Satan upon leaders is to think as though they have more rights than the people they lead. The Scriptures reveal this theme in powerful language: "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things."(Jer. 9:23-24). Christ humbled himself on the cross, and we are called to have the same attitude. One only has to think of the ministry of Paul, the man who gave up everything in service to others. Trinitarian leadership requires a humble heart in prostration before the Lord of all. When this principle becomes reality in our leadership people will experience God’s love for them, rather than our selfish use of them.

The final principle of Trinitarian leadership is invitation. In my opinion, this principle is easily overlooked in our utilitarian approach to people. As a leader, I get caught up in the

¹³ Luke 4:14, John 1:48, 4:17-18 and other miraculous works.

¹⁴ Rick Richardson, *Reimagining Evangelism: Inviting Friends on a Spiritual Journey*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 35.

¹⁵ Darrell Guder, *The Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 198.

concept of moving pawns on a chessboard for the betterment of the program. Instead the ministry is created for the people, and I must invite them to join me in that process. Christ's invitation to the disciples exemplifies the nature of this principle. It is an invitation that honors the value of the individual's choice and at the same time challenges the recipient to experience fulfillment through communal engagement. An invitation is an expression of value given to the recipient. As leaders we must realize that we are on a journey inaugurated through the invitation of the Lord, not by our own gifts and abilities. With a transformed paradigm we are motivated to invite others to join us on a journey of love and growth; this is ministry.

The above principles reveal to us a Trinitarian form of leadership that engages the value of people. It refuses to allow consumerism to pressure us into seeing people as commodities. It also refuses to look at leadership from a perspective that allows someone to exploit someone else. Instead we as leaders submit to the Triune God who bestowed on us His image of communal identity and love. With this in mind we will lead from the heart; following the example of Paul: "O, Corinthians, our hearts are opened wide, *to you.*" (2 Cor. 6:11)

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