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Christian Leadership in the Face of Church Politics

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Abstract

The concept of church politics often carries a negative connotation, but Christian leadership should be viewed as a privilege to serve God and others. Church politics refers to the interactions and power dynamics among individuals in authority, which can be either godly or ungodly. Christian leadership positions should be seen as a privilege and opportunity to serve God and mankind. Unfortunately, many Christian leaders are failing to discharge their duties, and church politics has become increasingly dangerous and divisive. Some individuals will stop at nothing to attain leadership positions, even if it means destroying the reputations of others. Church politics reflects the action and reaction of an individual in a position of authority towards others in discharging God's given authority and power. This study, based on participant observations and interactions with members and pastors, aims to shift perspectives on church politics and Christian leadership. The findings highlight the need for urgent attention to develop good moral values within the church. The paper concludes by recommending that the clergies should teach members about responsible leadership and urging the church to uphold biblical standards. By promoting servant leadership and glorifying God, Christian leaders can transform the discourse on church politics and create a more positive, uplifting environment.

Keywords: Leadership, Church, Politics, Christianity, Servant

Introduction

The intersection of Christian leadership and church politics is a complex and contentious issue, often leading to disagreements within Christianity and between the Christian right and left in modern politics. Scholars have explored this relationship in various ways, with some arguing that Christianity supports a specific political ideology while others believe Christians should avoid politics and government altogether. Given the diverse doctrines within churches, leaders must clearly communicate the stance of their local church or denomination on specific issues. Church leaders, chosen by God, are responsible for: protecting their flock from false teachings and heretical doctrines; identifying and preparing future leaders; and assessing individuals based on certain criteria to prevent unhealthy church politics.

To maintain a positive and growth-oriented environment, churches should establish policies to guide the selection of leaders and ensure that only suitable individuals assume positions of responsibility and authority. This helps to avoid harmful church politics and promotes a healthy, thriving church community.

Conceptual Clarification of Terms

Leadership

God intended for the Church to be governed, but not to become a law-making institution. According to Susan, W. (2020), leadership is "the art of motivating a group to achieve a common goal through direction and guidance." Ward's definition highlights the importance of effective leadership in achieving collective objectives.

Unfortunately, the Church has deviated from its scriptural foundations, resulting in leadership crises and political manoeuvrings. Through enforcing rigid programmes, churches risk becoming institutionalised, fostering an environment of church politics. This phenomenon prompts critical examination of leadership models under the following headings:

1. Types and qualities of effective leaders
2. Purpose and objectives of leadership



3. Biblical principles guiding Christian leadership and
4. Servant leadership and its applications.

Christian Leadership

Leaders can be viewed from various perspectives, each shedding light on the multifaceted role of leadership. "Leadership is the act of influencing and serving others out of Christ's interests in their lives, so they accomplish God's purposes for and through them." Christian leadership diverges from worldly notions of success, such as prioritising wealth or power. In Matthew 20:25-28, Jesus emphasises the importance of serving others, warning against the dangers of loving money and power. Unlike the Gentiles, who often abuse their authority, Christian leaders are called to serve others with humility, following Jesus' example of washing his disciples' feet. This selfless approach to leadership reflects God's purposes and values.

Politics

Politics involves balancing competing interests within a social system, as noted by Rummel (1976). There was a tension between Hispanics and Caucasians in a New York City conference. This tension was rooted in the city's significant Hispanic population, which makes up 28.3% of the city's population, with 2.49 million Hispanics residing in New York City. This is not an isolated incident, as Hispanics have historically faced challenges, including residential segregation, economic disparities, and limited political representation, in the United States.

In New York City, Hispanics have struggled to find their place in the political landscape. Despite being a significant portion of the population, they have faced barriers to political participation, including discriminatory practices such as poll taxes and gerrymandering. However, there are efforts underway to address these issues. Organisations such as the Inter-University Program for Latino Research (IUPLR) are working to promote Hispanic empowerment and representation. Additionally, initiatives such as the National Jobs for All Coalition (NJFAC) are advocating policies that benefit Hispanic communities. This case in point was the tension between Hispanics and Caucasians in a New York City conference, where the growing Spanish-speaking membership demanded greater representation and threatened to secede if their interests were not addressed. To maintain peace, political interests must be kept in balance, ensuring that leadership reflects the diverse makeup of the membership. According to Narasimha, R. P. V. (2004), managing politics in the church without undermining the gospel is crucial. While individuals may embody Jesus' self-sacrificing spirit, groups with common interests rarely do. Church politics should not supplant the gospel, but rather, decision-making processes, like those in legislative bodies should be guided by the leadership of the church, such as the board of elders or church councils.

Weber, M. (1946) defines politics as the process by which groups make decisions, involving authority, power, and social relations. This phenomenon is inevitable in all human interactions, including religious institutions. The church should engage with politics to have a positive impact on politicians and the political process, guiding them towards development and the greater good.

Church Politics

The term "church politics" often carries a negative connotation, but it can be used in a broader sense to describe the policies and leadership dynamics within the church. The way church leaders relate to each other and exercise authority can significantly impact the life-cycle of the church. The manner in which leadership is exercised is crucial, and it is essential to discuss this topic to correct misconceptions about church politics. While church leaders may believe in the teachings of the Bible, this does not mean that their values and policies align with its message. Many people associate politics with control or immoral influence, leading them to believe the church should be above politics.

However, in Matthew 20:26-28, Jesus, our perfect example, demonstrated that leadership involves serving others, not seeking power. This teaching was exemplified when He humbly washed His disciples' feet in John 13:1-17, demonstrating extraordinary humility and service. Apostle Paul echoes this in Philippians 2:5-8, urging believers to adopt the same attitude as Christ Jesus, 'who took on the very nature of a



servant.' Similarly, Peter emphasises the need for leaders to serve their followers, stating, 'Be shepherds of God's flock... not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock' (1 Peter 5:2-3). These biblical principles underscore the importance of servant leadership.

The Origins of Evil in Church Politics

Evil in church politics arises when leaders neglect to listen to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and disregard biblical principles. These two elements are intimately connected: The Holy Spirit prompts us to apply God's word while the Bible instructs us to be filled with the Holy Spirit. However, when leaders disobey or grieve the Holy Spirit through sin without repentance, evil spreads. This evil seeks to contradict the Holy Spirit's voice and power in the life of a leader, hindering the growth of God's work due to partial obedience.

The consequences of evil in church politics include:

- Legalism, formalism, and mechanical methodologies that disregard the leading of the Holy Spirit
- Doubt and confusion regarding the significance of the Cross and Christ's vision
- Leaders manipulating and modifying their actions for personal gain, leading people into oppression and bondage to a religious system that contradicts God's power and holiness.

Contrary to Christ's teachings on love (Matthew 22:37-40, John 13:34-35) and servant leadership (Matthew 20:26-28, Philippians 2:5-8), some leaders have prioritised pride, personal ambition, and a lust for power. This action grieves the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30, Isaiah 63:10), disregarding the principles of priesthood and love. Instead, leaders should exemplify love and faithfulness, guiding God's people towards godliness. By doing so, they will earn the love and service of their members.

Dangers in Leadership

Being a church leader is a great privilege, honour, and responsibility. According to 1st Timothy 3:6, the Bible emphasises that this role is not for new believers, but rather for those who have matured in their faith over time. God values church leaders and will reward those who serve him faithfully. However, leaders and their families are often the primary targets of Satan's attacks, making it essential for Christians to pray for their protection. Prayer is crucial to safeguard leaders' relationships with God, their marriages, families, physical and mental well-being. Neglecting to pray for them exposes them to satanic attacks, potentially leading to calamitous consequences. A spiritual leader can be easily offended, triggering a chain reaction of destructive consequences such as division, strife, and bitterness.

When worldly values such as love for money, power, and recognition dominate church politics, the church has lost its way and needs visionary leadership to restore its ministry. We must remember the true values of the church: honour, mercy, love, truth, and God's glory. The church must prioritise making disciples of Christ, not hypocritical leaders, and recognise the immense value of lost souls to God.

Types of Leadership

This paper will examine three leadership styles: dictatorial, preferential, and spiritual.

- i. **Dictatorial Leadership:** This type focuses solely on the leader, prioritising their control and decision-making power. According to Keith, M. (2020), dictatorial leaders make decisions based on their personal moral code, often disregarding input from others. They may solicit feedback but ultimately make choices that benefit themselves, combining their experiences, observations, and ideas to form judgments.
- ii. **Preferential Leadership:** This style involves leaders treating certain members more favourably or unfavourably than others, impacting group performance. As Kirkman (2006) notes, extreme preferential treatment can create an "in-group" and an "out-group," leading to dissatisfaction, withdrawal, and even disruption among the "out-group" members. Leaders should avoid both extreme preferential treatment and treat all members the same, as this can also affect the performance of effective members.



- iii. **Spiritual Leadership:** This style integrates spiritual values and principles into leadership, recognising the significance of followers and showing genuine concern for their well-being. Spiritual leaders help others find meaning in their lives by addressing their major problems and concerns.

The Qualities of Christian Leadership

The idea that leaders are born, not made, is only partially true. While some individuals may be born with a strong character, it is the development of positive qualities that truly matters. Character encompasses a person's physical, ethical, and spiritual attributes, and can be either attractive or unappealing. The New Testament provides examples of exemplary Christian leaders, such as Peter, James, John, Paul, Barnabas, Matthias, and Silas, who demonstrated qualities essential for Christian leadership. The council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) showcases these leaders, who received God's approval and guided the early Church with effectiveness. To be a good leader among God's people, one must develop qualities that make their character and behaviour beautiful and attractive. These qualities include:

- Formative requirements: shaping and molding oneself and others
- Communicative requirements: effectively conveying ideas and values
- Apostolic requirements: embodying the characteristics of Jesus' apostles, such as humility, love, and service

By developing these qualities, one can become effective leader, approved by God and respected by others.

Formative Qualities

Foundational leadership qualities can be categorised into four sets: sociability, responsibility, knowledge, and conviction.

- i. **Sociability:** A good leader must be friendly and approachable. Apostle Paul exemplified this; never being alone, even in prison (Col. 4:7, 10, 11; Phil. 4:3; Rom. 16:21). Friendliness is essential for effective leadership.
- ii. **Responsibility:** Irresponsible behaviours among church leaders and members undermine our testimony for God. A leader must be willing to take responsibility and endure challenges for the sake of the gospel (2 Cor. 11:28).
- iv. **Knowledge:** A good leader must have knowledge about their followers and apply attentiveness and patience to learn divine principles and truth (2 Tim. 2:15). They must understand the issues their followers face to lead successfully.
- v. **Conviction:** This inward faith expresses itself outwardly, becoming self-confidence rooted in personal knowledge. It gives spiritual assurance, even in adversity, and is essential for effective leadership.

Communicative Qualities

A strong and effective leader must possess qualities that enable them to build strong relationships with their followers. They must be able to inspire others to follow them. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11:1, "Follow me as I follow Christ." A leader's approach and character can speak louder than words. The key communicative qualities that attract followers to their leaders are:

1. **Loyalty:** This builds confidence and trust. A leader who is unreliable will foster fear and doubt in their members. Paul demonstrated loyalty in his letter to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:7).
2. **Understanding:** A good leader must be able to understand their followers. Paul, for example, showed concern for the welfare of the Thessalonian church and sent Timothy to check on them (1 Thessalonians 3:1-6).
3. **Appreciation:** Showing gratitude and appreciation attracts people to a leader. Paul expressed his appreciation to the Philippians for their support and gifts (Philippians 4:15).
4. **Tolerance:** A leader must be tolerant of others' mistakes and weaknesses while being intolerant of evil, especially in themselves. Paul's approach to John Mark demonstrates this (Acts 13:13; 15:36-41).



Additionally, a good leader must possess other qualities that form a committed character, gain self-confidence, and inspire others to follow them.

Apostolic Requirements/Qualities

In the early Church, when the need arose to manage the resources of the Lord's people, the apostles in Jerusalem established criteria for selecting capable leaders. These qualities, outlined in Acts 6:3, are also evident in the callings of spiritual leaders in the early days. The apostles taught, "Select seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, to oversee this matter."

These requirements can be summarised into three key qualities:

- i. **Good Reputation:** A leader must have an exemplary life, demonstrating honesty and honour in every aspect, serving as a representative of God.
- ii. **Genuine Spirituality:** A leader must be frank against sin, filled with the Holy Spirit, and completely yielded to Him, allowing no obstacles in His work through their life.
- iii. **Evident Wisdom:** A leader must possess knowledge and know when and how to apply it, ensuring the church moves forward.

Biblical Principles of Christian Leader

Jesus exemplifies spirit-led leadership, honouring and caring for his followers. While no leader is perfect, striving to emulate his example is essential. Christian leadership should set a high standard for society.

To be effective, leaders must adopt Christ-like principles:

- i. **Love:** Leaders should govern with God's love, central to Christianity, influencing followers with authority and compassion.
- ii. **Humility:** Ruling with humility earns people's trust and demonstrates Christ's interest, avoiding pride, conflict, and division.
- iii. **Integrity:** A good leader practices and values integrity, aligning words and actions, being consistent, sincere, and true to their message.
- iv. **Correction:** Correcting others with love shows respect and earns respect, essential for both leaders and followers.
- v. **Motivation:** Effective leaders motivate, rather than manipulate or misuse, their followers, fostering proper administration and positive growth.

Servant Leadership: Christian Leadership and Church Politics

The biblical standard for leadership and good church politics is servant leadership. This approach prioritises serving others, unlike traditional leadership which focuses on personal gain. Servant leadership is about empowering others, sharing power, and putting their needs first. Effective servant leaders inspire and guide their followers towards a common goal, just like Jesus did with his disciples. Key features of servant leadership applicable to Christian leadership and church politics include:

- i. **Leading with intentionality:** Moving towards a clear objective and inspiring others to follow
- ii. **Modelling behaviour:** Living out one's life as an example, with genuineness and modesty
- iii. **Prayer:** Recognising God as the ultimate leader and seeking guidance through prayer for courage, power, wisdom, and success
- iv. **Learning:** Being humble, calm, and understanding, with willingness to listen, reflect, and provide solutions
- v. **Loving:** Leading with genuine love, care, and concern for others, with love for God and everyone that flows through all actions.

By embracing these principles, Christian leaders can become effective servant leaders, promoting a positive and uplifting environment in the church.

Conclusion

In conclusion, church politics is a critical issue that demands attention in today's church. Effective leadership is essential to foster peace and unity among leaders and members. When leaders and members



submit to God's guidance, embracing values like reverence, truth, honour, and uprightness, the church will experience spiritual and physical growth. This paper has highlighted that, while leadership is vital in the church, it is crucial to allow the Holy Spirit and God's word to guide leaders, empowering them to uplift members and drive church development. By doing so, the church can overcome the evils that often accompany church politics.

Recommendations

1. Clergies need to teach members the responsibility of Christians in authority.
2. The Church must improve her teachings on leadership and politics so that the members may learn to uphold her biblical standard on leadership and politics.
3. The church should develop good moral values that will improve leadership and their activities.
4. Trainings and seminars for church workers should be conducted regularly to avoid deadly church politics activities in the church.
5. More counsellors should be trained in the church to correct the evils in church politics so as to instil appropriate moral values among her members.

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