

# **The Biblical Foundations of Leadership**

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Biblically and theologically, what can be said about the black church can also be said about the vision of its religious leadership. The black community's most effective leaders have been nurtured in the "cultural and spiritual womb" of the black church's biblical faith (The Black Church in the African American Experience, Lincoln and Mamiya, p. 8). Historically, biblical models of leadership informs the leadership vision and efforts of the black church to bring about spiritual transformation, social change and justice in the community. Abraham, Moses, Saul, David, Nehemiah, the Hebrew prophets, and Jesus are biblical models of leadership from which the black church has drawn its inspiration and commitment to the dream of God.

Biblical paradigms of leadership suggest that religious leadership is a response to a divine call to be in the service of God's love and justice. This biblical paradigm reveals a theology of leadership which focuses on a pattern of God calling leaders to one mission enterprise - to be in the service and restoration of God's image in everyone and in everything. Verna Dozier calls this mission of restoration "the Dream of God" (The Dream of God, Dozier, 1991).

The ancient Hebrew community and first century Christians have vital lessons to teach us about the nature of religious leadership. Let's briefly explore models of leadership from the Bible.

## **Abraham**

The story of Abraham represents the earliest record of leadership in the Bible. Abraham's leadership begins with an act of faith. Abraham is grasp by divine destiny to begin a journey of faith to an alternative future, a future which will bless all families of the earth. We learn from the experience of Abraham that leadership on the high plane of faith involves risk. Leadership response to faith is not an intellectual assent to a proposition, it is risking that the purpose to which God calls us is worthy of trust and service. Without deposits of faith, leadership in response to God's call proves impossible.

Fear and faith will challenge religious leaders. Fear prompted Abraham to deceive the Egyptians regarding his wife. Leadership is a faith venture. Leaders must be aware that the aims, goals, challenges of leadership may cheat and deceive them but if leaders run away from them they shall find themselves bumping into over and over again.

Abraham was a good steward of God's dream. Throughout the centuries of Christian theological development, Abraham stands, as a pivotal symbol of leadership that is both faithful and fruitful. Much of New Testament theology is an interpretation of the meaning of Abraham's faith and leadership. "And Abraham believed God, it was credited to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:3b NIV) rewards Abraham's faith, and initiates -an alternative community around Abraham's model of leadership.

## **Moses**

The Bible assigns a high status to visionary leaders who with courage offer themselves as agents of God's mission. In the case of Moses, God's mission was liberation. Moses grew up in Pharaoh's household as an Egyptian prince with a Hebrew memory. Moses had a significant religious experience on Mt. Horeb that sanctified him as -a leader of God's people from slavery to freedom. In the burning-bush story a situation of exploitation and injustice already exists, and God tells Moses that God is taking sides with oppressed Hebrews against the Egyptian establishment.

The burning bush contract introduces a revolutionary quality into the leadership model Moses represents. At its theological core, biblical leadership is revolutionary. Through Moses' leadership, a new social community emerged to match the vision of God's freedom. God called Moses to leadership as a liberator with prophetic and redemptive hope for the children of Israel.

Leadership proves difficult for Moses in the new alternative community. Moses was often frustrated. Idolatry and corrupt vision of God's purpose presented formidable barriers to the leadership Moses sought to offer. The Egyptian culture and consciousness remained with the people while they made slow progress to the Promised Land. History has found few leaders suited for the demands of liberation, who are equipped to lead people in transformation of identity, culture and consciousness. Moses paid a great price for the leadership he sought to give the Hebrew community. Hebrew leadership is difficult; it cost Moses denial of life in the Promised Land.

Through the revelation of God, Moses received the Ten Commandments and made them the ethical and theological mandate of the Hebrew community. One of the burden of religious leadership is consistent ethical and theological guidance. Religious leaders must consider themselves resident theologians to ensure that the ministry, mission and life of the faith community they serve is biblically based and theologically sound.

The leadership of Moses is symbolic; it extends over the past, present, and future into the religious experience of the Black church. The Negro Spiritual -

Go down, Moses,  
Way down in Egypt land,  
Tell old Pharaoh  
To let my people go.

captures the theological understanding of the kind of leadership the Black church has cultivated in its socio-political struggles for human dignity, freedom and salvation.

### **Saul**

Saul, the first king of Israel was a tragic figure whose leadership collapsed in failure because of jealousy and insecurity. Saul's leadership emerged in a transitional period between the end of an old order of tribal leadership through the Judges and the birth of a new order of leadership, Israel under the monarchy of kings. Transitional leadership is difficult, particularly when insecurities block vision and there is little facility for achieving right perspective of self-contradictions and ambiguities. Leaders need an other-than-self-reference if they are to lead in times of transition and social crisis. Saul was a weak leader because he sought to lead out of his small carnal package of vision. Saul's leadership ended in a tragic suicide of failure within without. The lesson we learn from Saul's life is that leadership is at its best when it serves as a conduit for corporate blessings. Leadership is never an end of itself but a means to the end-goal of God.

### **David**

David represents the best of monarchical leadership in the history of Israel. David's leadership is fixed -in Hebrew memory as engine for Israel's imagination and public history (David's Truth, Brueggeman, p. 14). Under David's leadership, Israel achieves rest from her military enemies. David was a figure of heroic attributes. He was a military genius, administrator, musician, poet, a shaper of the life of the people. The story of David's leadership is told and retold as a paradigm for all those who yearn for public responsibility and social transformation.

The irony of David's leadership is that while Israel is fascinated by him, deeply attracted to him, Israel is embarrassed and bewildered by David's incredible moral miscalculations adultery and conspiratorial actions that lead to murder. David's leadership is a mixture of public responsibility and power, personal temptation and deception. The God with whom David has to do is a God who will not permit leaders to choose the shape of their reality. David's public facade as a great leader is broken by the depth of moral pain. David is close enough to the wilderness faith-tradition of Moses to accept the judgment of God upon life. From David we learn a vital leadership lesson: public power will not solve

personal issues. With leadership comes public and private accountability, and justice is a community concern rather than merely an individual concern.

## **Nehemiah**

Nehemiah is a model of leadership for reconstruction. Nehemiah had a compelling social vision for rebuilding the people of God. Babylonian exile demoralized Judah. Jerusalem was made a wasteland. Survivors of the destruction of Jerusalem deeply lament over the loss of the temple and the Judah's national identity. Nehemiah grieves over the conditions of Jerusalem. The values and experience honed by years in exile presented Nehemiah with a rebuilding task. Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and rebuilding the people's confidence and faith in the -purpose of God -were formidable projects. Nehemiah performed both projects well. Nehemiah's vision of reconstruction was practical, resourceful, and transformational.

Nehemiah met opposition with -courage and imagination as nothing was permitted to stop God's work. Self-determined leaders are able to remain focus despite many distractions. Nehemiah's model of leadership reveals that the longing for reconstruction comes from grief that arise from looking out over the city with a vision of newness. Nehemiah's rebuilding came from his tears, from mourning over "the trouble we are in." The energy for rebuilding comes from the deep desire and commitment to deconstruct oppressive social systems and reconstruct broken families and the wasteland of neighborhoods into moral communities of hope and new possibilities. We learn from the leadership of Nehemiah how leaders can turn mourning and grief into rebuilding a usable future.

## **Ezekiel**

Prophetic leadership is seen at its best in the life of Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet/priest who witnessed the spiritual and moral decline of Judah. Inevitable destruction placed the people in exile seventy years. Ezekiel describes the condition of the exiles as being like "a valley of dry bones." Ezekiel's assignment was to makes sense out of this destruction in terms of the ultimate purpose of God. This was not easy leadership. From the perspective of the exiles, a future of recovery was hopeless. Hope unbelieved is always considered nonsense. Ezekiel's leadership bears witness to the fact that God is not defeated by the wretchedness of human beings and can even use that wretchedness to work out glorious purposes. Ezekiel's courageous leadership and preaching, teaches us that hope is the very dynamic of history. Hope is the energy of transformation. Hope is the engine of change and the door from one reality to another. Ezekiel was an agent of hope empowering people to imagine change, new possibilities, and opportunities to return to the dream of God.

Ezekiel teaches us that leaders who serve God's purpose must be prepared to provide leadership which seems nonsensical, illogical and unreasonable but nonetheless is possible, reasonable and understandable as the God's will.

## **Jesus**

The leadership of Jesus is seen by Christian theologians as the incarnation of the reign of God. For thirty-three years, Jesus lived a remarkable life of absolute trust and allegiance to life in the kingdom of God. Jesus had a significant religious experience while being baptized in the Jordan River in which he understood who he was and what he was called to be. That baptism was followed by a period of desert struggle to determine how best to live out the dream of God. In Jesus' inaugural sermon, he reminds his community of the kind of leadership God called him to embrace.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those that are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18-19 KJV).

Jesus functioned as a preacher, theologian and teacher. With his teaching came unusual authority about the true meaning of community, love, and the righteousness of God. The model of Jesus' leadership was that of a pastoral theologian committed to the realization of divine justice for God's entire creation. For Jesus justice is love in action. His commitment was to the weak and marginal. Jesus proclaimed the Sermon on the Mount as the ethical and spiritual foundation for life committed to God's kingdom. Jesus imbued the disciples with the vision of God's reign, a vision which brought him into conflict with the kingdoms of the world. Jesus' leadership was liberating, redemptive, prophetic, transforming and salvific. The leadership of Jesus cost him crucifixion but won for the world the salvation of God.

Jesus teaches us many things about authentic spiritual leadership. Kingdom priorities must come first in the life of a leader. Servant leadership brings hope transformation to life. Suffering has merit when done to fulfill God's purpose. Leaders must teach and theologize with integrity by being true to the context of the community they serve. Religious leadership must affirm the humanity of all people under the grace of God.

Leaders must be unbiased in serving God's love and justice toward the transformation of all injustice and oppression of life.

Leadership in the black church experience has been an attempt to preach, teach, and live out the biblical vision of God's reign in such ways that it reaches and transforms the cultural, social, political, and economic realities of people the church serves. Freedom in the service of God's love and justice is the goal of religious leadership.

## **Study Questions**

1. What models of biblical leadership most appeal to you? Why? How does the model apply to your church's need and vision of

leadership?

2. Discuss the kind of leadership you believe is essential for church to face the social and spiritual crisis of your community?

3. Discuss the following characteristics of biblical leadership:

a. Leader as theologian b. Leader as visionary c. Leader as teacher d. Leader as builder e. Leaders as change agent

4. Create a dialogue with leaders in your church about your concerns for spiritual and social transformation.