

PEER REVIEWED ARTICLES

# Leadership Foundations for Christian Leaders

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## Gospel Leadership

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This paper defines leadership biblically as cultivating the conditions in which others can flourish. This definition draws attention to both the work and purpose of leadership. It is argued that this definition of leadership, also called gospel leadership, is justified in the light of both the servant and shepherd biblical frameworks of leadership. Finally, this paper identifies why leadership is so important, and why it ought to be prioritised by church leaders, especially those who seek improved health and growth in their church.

## INTRODUCTION

Michael Dennis was the Senior Pastor at Thornleigh Community Baptist Church when I was in high school and university. Mike led the church through many important yet difficult changes, such as renewal of the church's leadership teams, the pursuit of excellence in public ministries, a cultural shift towards gospel-centred engagement with the local community, and redeveloping the church's buildings. He knew all the church members by name and developed relationships proactively with adults and kids alike. He maintained a personal and public witness in the local community by serving actively as a member of the local Rotary club, writing a regular editorial in the local community newspaper, and building friendships wherever he could. He was a model of servant leadership, from the way he treasured his wife Meg, to the way he shielded vulnerable young leaders from church politics, to his mowing of the church lawns. Under Mike's leadership, adults and children came to Christ, matured in Christ, and served Christ inside and outside the church.<sup>1</sup> The church grew significantly under Mike's oversight, from less than 200 people to well over 600. The same pattern of growth occurred in Mike's previous churches.

Effective leadership can make a significant positive difference in our personal relationships, our church and workplace organisations, and in the wider community. Too often however, leadership is a source of weakness and not strength.

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<sup>1</sup> A number of younger people from this church studied at theological college and left the church to serve in a range of roles. Two current lecturers at Christ College and two current presbyterian church leaders were also influenced by Mike's ministry during their early years.

In my own denomination,<sup>2</sup> leadership was rated by church attenders as our single greatest weakness<sup>3</sup> and their highest priority to be addressed.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, they believed our preaching and teaching was our greatest strength<sup>5</sup> and the area of church life they valued most.<sup>6</sup> This correlates with research conducted among our church leaders that found 88% believed they were ‘very well’ equipped for preaching/teaching.<sup>7</sup> Despite our clear strength in preaching and teaching, our denomination experienced negative nominal growth in Sydney (-11%), Metropolitan NSW (-17%) and the ACT (-17%) during the decade to 2016.<sup>8</sup>

This pattern of relative strength in preaching/teaching compared to leadership, and poor nominal growth over time, is not isolated to the Presbyterian Church of Australia. 81% of Protestant church leaders in Australia believed they were ‘very well’ equipped for preaching/teaching, but only half (50%) thought they were ‘very well’ equipped for leading a group through change<sup>9</sup> (the comparative response to this last question for presbyterian church leaders was so low that it was not published by NCLS Research). [Figure 1](#) shows the nominal growth rates of major Christian Protestant denominations in NSW and the ACT between 2006 to 2016. All denominations except for the Pentecostals experienced negative nominal growth over this period.<sup>10</sup> The significance of leadership for the health and growth of congregations is explored later in this paper.

There are likely to be many possible reasons for this phenomenon of poor equipping in leadership. First, the quality of the leadership training many church leaders received was likely to be inferior compared to their training in preaching and teaching. The disciplines of preaching and teaching are more established in the theological academy, there are many more staff employed to teach these subjects, and the quality of textbooks and teaching materials is

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2 The Presbyterian Church of Australia in NSW and the ACT.

3 NCLS Research, “Church Life Profile: Presbyterian Church of Australia in NSW,” in *2016 National Church Life Survey* (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2017), 25.

4 Research, “Church Life Profile: Presbyterian Church of Australia in NSW,” 4.

5 Research, “Church Life Profile: Presbyterian Church of Australia in NSW,” 25.

6 Research, “Church Life Profile: Presbyterian Church of Australia in NSW,” 4.

7 Sam Sterland et al., “A Snapshot of Effective and Sustainable Leadership Issues: Presbyterian Church of NSW/ACT,” (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2018), 6.

8 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing*, (Canberra 2006) Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing*, (Canberra 2011) Australian bureau of Statistics, *Census of Population and Housing*, (Canberra 2016).

9 Sterland et al., “A Snapshot of Effective and Sustainable Leadership Issues: Presbyterian Church of NSW/ACT,” 6.

10 Analysis of older comparative denominational church health data from National Church Life Survey indicates that the Pentecostal Church outperformed the Presbyterian Church in NSW (and most others) across every health measure except attracting visitors. See further NCLS Research, “National Church Life Survey,” (Sydney South: NCLS Research, 2006). A detailed examination of the reasons why the Pentecostal church has grown significantly, and how they approach leadership, are beyond the scope of this paper.

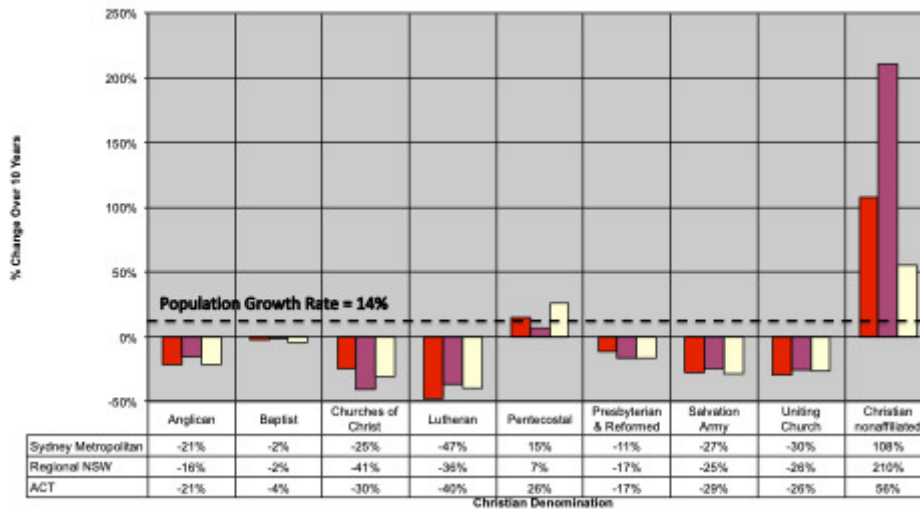


Figure 1: Nominal Church Growth by Denomination over Time: 2006-2016<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Census of Population and Housing." Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Census of Population and Housing." Australian bureau of Statistics, "Census of Population and Housing."

generally of a higher quality. A major reason for this lies in the very nature of the leadership discipline itself, which is newer, contested, multifaceted, and notoriously difficult to define.<sup>11</sup>

Second, I have observed that when leadership is taught and written about by many church leaders, it is often framed pragmatically, without adequate biblical foundations. This phenomenon may have been behind the approach of some theological educators to divorce leadership from the so-called 'core business' of the pastor.<sup>12</sup> Here the essence of pastoring or shepherding God's people is reduced to feeding and caring for God's sheep (John 21:15-17), and does not include overseeing or leading them (1 Pet 5:2).

Finally, perhaps related to the previous discussion, the significance of leadership is frequently underestimated, and in some cases, played down intentionally. I have read some theological educators who refer to leadership using pejorative labels such as 'administration' and 'compliance'. They have also suggested that this lesser work of leadership can 'drain the joy out of teaching' God's word (their highest priority).<sup>13</sup>

This paper provides Christian leaders with a biblical foundation for leadership practice. It does this by first articulating a simple, comprehensive, and Bible-based definition of leadership. This definition is then explored and justified

<sup>11</sup> These matters will be explored in more detail in the next section of this paper.

<sup>12</sup> Keith G. Condie, ed., *"Tend My Sheep": The Word of God and pastoral ministry* (London: The Latimer Trust, 2016), i.

<sup>13</sup> This is the actual discourse used by some theological educators in my broader church culture.

in the light of two major biblical frameworks for leadership. Lastly, the significance of leadership is highlighted, especially as it relates to church health and growth.

Readers of this paper won't become like Michael Dennis overnight. Developing as a leader requires challenging work assignments, mentoring/coaching, and relevant training.<sup>14</sup> But this paper will help them to grasp many of the biblical convictions that drove Mike, gave shape to his pastoral leadership, and were passed on to younger leaders like me.

## THE NATURE OF LEADERSHIP

The best place to begin is with a definition of leadership. Yet as noted earlier, defining leadership is actually quite difficult. Researchers in the field of leadership have observed that leadership is a contested concept that is “constantly being discussed and debated”.<sup>15</sup> Some have therefore claimed there is no consensus as to its basic meaning.<sup>16</sup>

Defining leadership is also challenging because the same term can be used to describe four different approaches to leadership<sup>17</sup>:

1. *Position*-based leadership: *where* leaders serve makes them leaders
2. *Person*-based leadership: *who* leaders are makes them leaders
3. *Performance*<sup>18</sup>-based leadership: *what* leaders achieve makes them leaders
4. *Process*-based leadership: *how* leaders get things done makes them leaders

How authors define leadership is inevitably shaped by their preferred approach to leadership.

Many Christian and secular definitions of leadership focus too much on style, position, nature of influence or its effects, or are too narrow to address all relevant concerns.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> D Day and L Dragoni, “Leadership Development: An Outcome-Orientated Review Based on Time and Levels of Analyses,” 2 (2015): 133-56; David V. Day, “Leadership Development,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Leadership* (ed. Alan Bryman, et al.; LA: Sage, 2011); David V. Day et al., “Advances in leader and leadership development: A review of 25 years of research and theory,” 25 (2014): 63-82.

<sup>15</sup> Brad Jackson and Ken Parry, *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Leadership* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2018), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Keith Grint, *Leadership: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>17</sup> Grint, *Leadership: A Very Short Introduction*, 4.

<sup>18</sup> A modification introduced by Jackson and Parry, *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Leadership*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Banks and Bernice M. Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership: A Christian Evaluation of Current Approaches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

As difficult as it can be to define leadership, a definition is necessary so we can talk meaningfully about leadership in our various contexts. Any definition proposed should be broad enough to describe the general work of leadership across a range of settings, yet simple enough to promote clarity and personal application.

The following definition of leadership is proposed: ***leadership is cultivating the conditions in which others can flourish.***

This definition is couched intentionally within an agricultural metaphor with moorings in the Garden of Eden. The responsibility God gave to Adam for developing and protecting God's garden (Gen 2:15) must have involved a very diverse range of tasks. For example: planning, clearing, building, digging, planting, pruning, weeding, fertilising, and watering. As a gardener, Adam could not make these plants grow through his own power. Under God, all he could do was to cultivate the conditions that would support and enable growth.

Paul reminds us in 1 Cor 3:5-9 of this very same principle in relation to spiritual growth.<sup>20</sup> Growth or fruitfulness is ultimately a work of God (1 Cor 3:7). This does not mean that spiritual growth is completely independent of other factors. Spiritual growth will be impacted by the condition of the soil (e.g. the receptiveness of people's hearts to God's word – Matt 13:3-23, Mark 4:3-20, Luke 8:5-15), and our labour that cultivates the conditions conducive of growth (e.g. planting and watering – 1 Cor 3:5-8).

The definition of leadership has only two elements:

1. The *work* of leadership: proactively cultivating the conditions for growth
2. The *purpose* of leadership: the flourishing of others

The *work* of leadership is broad and multifaceted. It is far more than mere administration or compliance. Leadership in our ministries, just like leadership in our families (1 Tim. 3:4-5, Tit. 1:6), will involve a range of complementary commitments designed to foster growth and flourishing. Some of this work may be repeatable over time and across different contexts in such a way as to be capable of generic description.<sup>21</sup> However, much of it is likely to change over time and turn on the particular needs and circumstances in our local setting.

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<sup>20</sup> See also John Stott, *Basic Christian Leadership: Biblical Models of Church, Gospel and Ministry* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2002); Timothy Keller, *Centre Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centred Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> For example, James Kouzes and Barry Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012).

At the time of writing, my city of Sydney has emerged from a state of enforced lockdown for many weeks to limit the spread of the Delta strain of COVID-19. Non-essential work was cancelled or restricted to homes, children learned from home and not school, and our churches were permitted to gather online only. Across the city, many people suffered from the effects of reduced income, limited social and physical contact, increased pressure to deliver work outcomes while supervising children, and significant mental and emotional fatigue. Leading others well in these circumstances requires far more than merely forming a shared vision and developing plans for its accomplishment. It involves cultivating those particular and relevant conditions necessary for those you are responsible for to flourish. For example, securing relevant financial resources to maintain critical employment commitments, deferring non-essential projects, reducing team and individual workload, increasing social connections among team members, and providing training in online work processes.

The *purpose* of leadership, and the basis for the evaluation of leadership, is comparatively simple: the flourishing of the people or ministry for which the leader is responsible. A flourishing or healthy ministry fulfills the purpose for which it was created.

I have had interactions with senior leaders from a number of Protestant denominations in NSW, including my own, and observe that most church leaders want the same thing: church health and growth. However, when they are asked to define what church health actually means to them, or what conditions should be cultivated to promote it, few have been able to provide a substantial response. For this reason, and to promote renewal among our churches, a denominational committee I served on<sup>22</sup> developed a comprehensive Theological Vision<sup>23</sup> that defined for our leaders what flourishing could look like in a range of contexts. Specifically, it identified what healthy churches, healthy Christians, healthy leadership teams, and healthy presbyteries and assemblies ought to look like, within the context of our denomination's Reformed theological convictions and cultural settings. The Theological Vision also identified many relevant conditions that could be cultivated to promote health in each of these contexts. Appendix 1 contains a summary of what a flourishing presbyterian church ought to look like and a range of relevant conditions to cultivate. To read more about the rich biblical-theological foundations supporting this work, and how flourishing could be

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<sup>22</sup> The PCNSW Special Committee for Denominational Renewal.

<sup>23</sup> Murray Smith and John McClean, "A Theological Vision for the Presbyterian Church of Australia in the State of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory," (Burwood: PCNSW Special Committee for Denominational Renewal, 2019).

cultivated in all these contexts (i.e. among churches, Christians, leadership teams and presbyteries and assemblies), please download the Theological Vision which is publicly available.<sup>24</sup>

Having defined leadership, the next task is to reflect more deeply on leadership through two major biblical frameworks.

## **BIBLICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR LEADERSHIP**

The contemporary terminology of ‘leadership’ does not feature prominently in the Bible (e.g. Num 27:18, 33:1, Ps 109:8, Acts 1:20). This does not mean however, that leadership is of little importance in the Bible, or is of secondary importance to preaching or ‘word-ministry’.

### ***SERVANT LEADERSHIP***

The most common biblical metaphor of leadership taught and practised by Christian leaders is the leader as servant. This was the first metaphor that Michael Dennis taught all his young leaders.

The term ‘servant’, or more literally ‘slave’, has been applied extensively to leaders throughout the Old Testament and New Testament (listed below in bold type) as a title of honour.<sup>25</sup> In the Old Testament it has been applied to **Abraham** (Gen 26:24, Ps 105:6, 42), the three **Patriarchs** (Exod 32:13, Deut 9:27), **Moses** (Exod 14:31, Num 12:7-8, Deut 3:24, 34:5, Num 11:11, 12:7-8, Josh 1:1-2, 7, 13, 15; 8:31, 33, 9:24, 11:12, 15, 12:6, 14:7, 18:7, 22:2, 4-5, 1 Kgs 8:53, 56, 2 Kgs 18:12, 21:8, 1 Chr 6:49, 2 Chr 1:3, 24:6, 9, Neh 1:7-8, 9:14, 10:29, Ps 105:26, Dan 9:11, Mal 4:4, Heb 3:5), **Caleb** (Num 14:24), **Joshua** (Josh 5:14, 24:29, Judg 2:8), **Samson** (Judg 15:18), **Hannah** (1 Sam 1:11), **Samuel** (1 Sam 3:9-10), **David** (2 Sam 7:5, 8, 24:10, 1 Kgs 11:13, 32, 34, 36, 38, 2 Kgs 8:19, 19:34, 20:6, Ps 89:3, 20, 132:10, Isa 37:35, Jer 33:21-22, 26, Ezek 34:23-24, 37:24-25, Luke 1:69, Acts 4:25), **Solomon** (1 Kgs 3:7-9, 8:28-30, 52, 59, 2 Chr 6:19-21), **Elijah** (1 Kgs 18:36, 2 Kgs 9:36, 10:10), **Jonah** (2 Kgs 14:25) **Ahijah** (1 Kgs 14:18, 15:29), **Hezekiah** (2 Chr 32:16), **Nehemiah** (Neh 1:6, 11), **Job** (Job 1:8, 2:3, 42:7-8), **Isaiah** (Isa 20:3), **Eliakim** (Isa 22:20), **Daniel** (Dan 6:20, 9:17), the three **friends of Daniel** (Dan 3:26, 28), **Zerubbabel** (Hag 2:23), and Isaiah’s promised **suffering servant** (Isa 42:1-7, 49:1-7, 50:4-11, 52:13-53:12). It has also been applied to a number of individuals in the New Testament. For example, **Peter** (2 Pet 1:1), **John** (Rev 1:1), **Paul** (Acts 16:17, 26:16, Rom 1:1, 1 Cor 3:5, 6:20, 7:22-23, 9:19, 2 Cor 6:4, 11:23 Gal 1:10, Phil 1:1, Titus 1:1.), **James** (Jas 1:1), **Timothy** (Phil 1:1, 1 Tim 4:6, 2 Tim 2:24), **Jude** (Jude 1), **Tychicus** (Col 4:7), **Epaphras** (Col 1:7, 4:12), **Mary** (Luke 1:38, 48), **Simeon** (Luke 2:29), **Phoebe** (Rom 16:1), and **Apollos** (1 Cor 3:5). Like **Nebuchadnezzar** in the Old Testament (Jer 25:9,

<sup>24</sup> A copy of the full report can be found at: <https://christcollege.edu.au/theological-vision/>.

<sup>25</sup> See further Don N. Howell Jr., *Servants of the Servant: A Biblical Theology of Leadership* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003), 6.

27:6, 43:10), **secular rulers** are also called God's servants (Rom 13:3-4). Of all the servants in the Bible, none are greater than **Jesus** (Acts 3:13, 26, 4:27, Rom 15:8, Phil 2:5-8), Isaiah's promised Suffering Servant (Matt 12:18-21).

Jesus' made extensive use of servant-steward imagery in his teaching (for example, Matt 13:24-30, 18:23-35, 20:20-28, 21:33-41, 22:1-14, 24:45-51, 25:14-30, Mark 9:33-37, 10:35-45, 12:1-12, 13:32-37, Luke 12:35-48, 14:15-24, 15:11-32, 16:1-13, 17:5-10, 19:11-27, 20:9-18, John 12:20-26, 13:12-20, 15:12-17, 18-25). He also modelled servant behaviour in his actions, especially the counter-cultural act of washing his disciples' feet (John 13:1-11). Ultimately however, all of Jesus' life, from his incarnation to his death on the cross, was the act of a servant who humbled himself to serve others (Phil 2:5-8).

This same Jesus taught his disciples how to lead like a servant. In Mark's gospel<sup>26</sup> we are told that James and John asked Jesus to sit at his right and left hand in Jesus' new kingdom (Mark 10:35-37). Jesus pointed out that they didn't know what they were asking for (Mark 10:38). To follow after Jesus would mean suffering like Jesus (Mark 10:38). The cup in verse 38 is a reference to future suffering that Jesus would drink through his death on the cross (Mark 14:36). Undeterred, James and John replied that they could follow Jesus (Mark 10:39). Jesus assured them that they would suffer as they followed him, nevertheless these high positions are not taken through our initiative, but are given (by the Father in Matt 20:23) to those for whom they are prepared (Mark 10:40).

When the rest of the disciples heard this discussion, they were indignant (Mark 10:40), perhaps because they weren't proactive enough to ask first! So Jesus called together his closest disciples to teach them about leadership in his kingdom:

You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45).

Jesus did not rebuke James and John for seeking greatness. Instead, he redirected their ambition away from serving themselves to serving others, like a slave. The greatest in the kingdom are not the ones in the highest positions, but those who have lowered themselves to become slaves to all. Jesus alone can

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<sup>26</sup> Similar episodes are recounted in Matt. 20:20-28 and Luke 22:24-27.



claim to be ‘first’, because he lowered himself more than any other by giving his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45), even though he was the promised Son of Man (Dan 7:13).

This particular teaching of Jesus has changed the way many Christians and non-Christians have conceived of leadership. ‘Servant Leadership’ is now a recognised field in contemporary leadership research. It is also an established approach to leadership practice in many organisations.<sup>27</sup> Although Greenleaf<sup>28</sup> is popularly credited with introducing the concept of servant leadership, the academic literature has recognised that it came originally from the example and teaching of Jesus.<sup>29</sup>

Servant leadership today is still framed in ways that are consistent with Jesus’s life and teaching. A recent mainstream leadership journal provided the following definition of servant leadership after reviewing over 200 papers in this field, “servant leadership is an other-orientated approach to leadership manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests, and outward reorienting of their concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community.”<sup>30</sup>

Servant leadership prioritises the needs and interests of individual followers, then the organisation, and finally the wider community, over the individual needs and interests of the leader. The definition of leadership as cultivating the conditions in which others can flourish embodies the ethos of servant leadership. We might even call it *gospel leadership*, in so far as it is patterned after the life and teaching of Christ.

## **LEADERSHIP AS SHEPHERDING**

Another comprehensive biblical metaphor of leadership is the shepherd. The metaphor of the leader as shepherd is used throughout the Bible to describe prophets, priests and kings in the Old Testament, as well as elders in the New Testament.<sup>31</sup> This was the second metaphor of leadership that Michael Dennis taught his young leaders.

In the Old Testament, God answered **Moses’s** prayer for a successor so that God’s people would not “be as sheep that have no shepherd” (Num 27:16-17). The **judges** of Israel were commanded by God to “shepherd my people Israel” (2 Sam 7:7, 1 Chr 17.6). God appointed **David** as king in order that he might

27 For example, servant leadership has been adopted within several major organisations such as Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, Ritz-Carlton, SAS, Intel and Marriott. See further Nathan Eva et al., “Servant Leadership: A systematic review and call for future research,” 30 (2019): 111-32. See also popular business books like Simon Sinek, *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don’t* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2017).

28 Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1977).

29 Sen Sendjaya and James C. Sarros, “Servant Leadership: Its Origin, Development, and Application in Organizations,” 9 (2002): 57-64.

30 Eva et al., “Servant Leadership: A systematic review and call for future research,” 114.

31 Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds after My own Heart: Pastoral traditions and leadership in the Bible* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 2006), 247.

be “shepherd of my people Israel” (2 Sam 5:2, 1 Chr. 11:2). The **prophets** and **priests** were called shepherds (Jer 23:1-15). **Other leaders** of Israel are called shepherds (Ezek 34, Zech 10:3). God even calls **Cyrus**, the ruler of the Persians who subdues nations before him (Isa 45:1), “my shepherd” (Isa 44:28).

The term shepherd is applied to **Jesus**. He is the promised “ruler who will shepherd my people Israel” (Mic 5:4, Matt 2:6). He is the one whom God promised to “set up over them one shepherd, my servant David” (Ezek 34:23). Jesus calls himself “the Good Shepherd” twice in John’s gospel (John 10:11, 14). Peter refers to him as “the Chief Shepherd” (1 Pet 5:4; cf. 2:25), and in Revelation, one of the elders describes Jesus as “the Lamb in the midst of the throne” who “will be their Shepherd” (Rev 7:17).

The term shepherd is also applied directly to **elders** in the New Testament. Paul employs a shepherd metaphor when he instructed the elders of the church in Ephesus to “pay attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:17, 28). Paul expects all elders to lead well in the church (1 Tim 5:17), just as they also lead their own families (1 Tim 3:4-5).<sup>32</sup> Peter also calls the elders of the churches to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you” by, among other things, “exercising oversight” (1 Pet 5:2).

Shepherding, also called *pastoring*,<sup>33</sup> involves a diverse role set as determined by the daily needs of the ‘flock’ under their care. The primary tasks given by the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4) to his shepherd leaders are<sup>34</sup>:

- *Overseeing* the church in its life and mission (1 Tim 3:4-5, 5:17, 1 Pet 5:2);
- *Teaching* from the Scriptures (1 Tim 3:2, Titus 1:9);
- *Praying* with and for God’s people (Jas 5:14, Acts 6:4); and
- *Modelling* Christlike living (1 Tim 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, 1 Pet 5:3).

It is not wise to divorce the God-given shepherding work of oversight from other shepherding tasks like preaching and teaching. These functions, along with prayer and modelling, belong together as part of the same role set. This is because God’s sheep need all four shepherding tasks for them to flourish. Further, these tasks can work together in ways that are complementary and mutually reinforcing. For example, Michael Dennis would often lead others through his teaching, his prayers, and his personal modelling.

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<sup>32</sup> The word used in the Greek can be translated as lead, rule, or direct.

<sup>33</sup> The word *pastor* is an anglicized form of the Latin/French word for *shepherd*. See further Laniak, *Shepherds after My own Heart: Pastoral traditions and leadership in the Bible*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> For a fuller description of the biblical metaphor of the shepherd, see further Appendix 2 of this paper.

It is important to note that there is no biblical instruction or command for shepherds to *grow* God's flock.<sup>35</sup> As stated earlier, growth is something that God alone gives (1 Cor 3:5-9).

Appendix 2 gives a fuller description of what 'good' leadership looks like through the metaphor of the leader as shepherd. The work of pastoring or shepherding is *significantly* broader than merely feeding and caring for God's sheep.

Good shepherding ultimately benefits the flock and their owner. Sometimes the *work* of shepherding involves gentle nurture; other times it requires protection and discipline. The *purpose* however, remains the same: the health and growth of the flock. The definition of leadership as cultivating the conditions in which others can flourish is therefore consistent with the metaphor of leadership as shepherding.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership matters because God created his world to respond to our rule. God placed Adam in his good garden to work it and take care of it (Gen 2:15). God made mankind and gave us dominion over his creation (Gen 1:26-30, Ps 8:4-8) that we might 'fill and subdue' the earth. God presented the various creatures to Adam for him to name (Gen 2:19). In Gen 2:21-22, God created a suitable helper to assist him "rule over" the fish, birds and every living creature in God's good world, a task that would require them to be fruitful, increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it (1:28).

Leadership can produce significant positive change in our world. For example, Joseph's leadership during the 7 year famine in Egypt (Gen 41:38-56), and Nehemiah and Ezra's leadership during the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the exile. Contemporary empirical research has found that effective leadership can:

- Promote outstanding organisational performance greater than 6.9 times the market average over a 15 year period across diverse industries.<sup>36</sup> The same principles also applied to non-profit and government organisations<sup>37</sup>;
- Increase organisational labour productivity, sales and employee growth across medium and large-sized manufacturing and service organisations<sup>38</sup>; and

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<sup>35</sup> The closest expectation would be seeking and rescuing lost sheep. See further Appendix 2 of this paper.

<sup>36</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why some companies make the leap...and others don't* (London: Random House, 2001).

<sup>37</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors* (London: Random House Business Books, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> R. Green, "Management Matters in Australia: Just how productive are we?" (Canberra: Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, 2009), 5-6.

- Draw out an average of nearly three times more energy, drive, commitment and productivity in organisational members compared to our worst leaders.<sup>39</sup>

While leadership has the capacity to bring about much good, it also has the capacity to introduce significant harm. For example, during the time of exile, Ezekiel recorded God's stinging rebuke of Israel's shepherd leaders who scattered his sheep through their poor leadership (Ezek 34:1-6).

Nowhere are the differences between good and bad leadership more stark, or the consequences more significant, than in the leadership of Adam and Jesus. Adam's disobedient leadership led to sin and death entering our world and spreading to all mankind. But Jesus's obedient leadership led to grace, righteousness and eternal life (Rom 5:12-21). Jesus is the promised son of David who will rule forever (2 Sam 7:12-16), and the 'good shepherd' (Ezek 34:23-24, John 10:14-18) who laid down his life so his sheep might live (John 10:10-11).

Leadership is also critically important in God's church. Jesus exercises leadership over his church today, in part, through church leaders appointed as his 'officers'.<sup>40</sup> Chapter 31.1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith states, "the Lord Jesus, as King and Head of His Church, hath herein appointed a government, in the hand of Church officers..."<sup>41</sup>

Our leadership in Christ's church therefore matters and can produce significant effects. Stetzer and Dodson conducted surveys and interviews among 324 US churches to identify the key factors that enabled churches to transition from a period of decline or plateau to significant numerical growth.<sup>42</sup> These authors found that leadership was the single greatest factor impacting upon church revitalisation.<sup>43</sup> "As a pastor or church leader, you are and will always be – under the headship of Jesus – the key to the church. You are the primary shaper of your church's values, beliefs, strategy, and direction. You set the direction for your people. God calls you to focus on both quality and quantity; not just 'how many' but also 'how well'."<sup>44</sup>

Stetzer repeated this claim in *Christianity Today*, noting the surprising nature of this finding:<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations*, 333-34.

<sup>40</sup> "Westminster Larger Catechism," in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1648/2003), Q&A 45.

<sup>41</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2003), 119. See also Chapter 5 in relation to God's providential rule through secondary causes. A more detailed discussion relating to the nature and shape of church office is beyond the scope of this paper. See further Murray Smith, "Shepherds and Servants: the two offices Christ appointed in his Church," (2018): 179-200.

<sup>42</sup> Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too* (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Publishing Group, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too*, 34.

<sup>44</sup> Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches: How 300 churches Turned Around and Yours Can Too*, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Ed Stetzer, "My Love/Hate Relationship with Leadership." (13 April 2016).

When Mike Dodson and I were researching and writing Comeback Churches...we wanted to find what factors led to church revitalization. We expected to find prayer, preaching, evangelism, etc. We researched and we studied more than 320 churches. We called them and did multiple interviews with dozens of them. Do you know what we found? Everything rises and falls on leadership.

Their research found that ‘turnaround leaders’ helped the congregation to admit that they had a problem, and then identified the underlying causes. They were proactive and challenged excuses, shared ministry and delegated non-essential work, challenged attitudes towards growth, activated a shared vision and developed other leaders. These leaders cultivated the conditions in which revitalization (flourishing) could occur. They were a lot like my old pastor Michael Dennis.

Around the same time in Australia, I completed a similar research project for the Baptist Union of NSW and ACT.<sup>46</sup> This research sought to measure the health and growth of local churches, identify the factors that enabled and constrained their health and growth, and recommend strategies that would cultivate health and growth. Surveys were administered to 14,437 church attenders and 1,201 church leaders. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a further 71 church leaders. My research also concluded that leadership was the most significant factor affecting church health and growth. According to church leaders, ‘good’ leadership was the top factor in healthy growing churches, while ‘bad’ leadership was the top factor in unhealthy churches.

The good news for Christians seeking to exercise effective leadership is that gospel leadership, or leadership shaped by the life and teaching of Christ, is not only biblically sound, it also works in real life. When leadership is practised as an act of service designed to promote the flourishing of others, it produces positive outcomes at multiple levels.

A recent scholarly review of servant leadership publications over the last decade provides the following encouragement to leaders in churches, the workplace, and other ministry settings:

The consistent positive relationships found between servant leadership and valued outcomes (even when controlling for dominant forms of leadership, such as transformational and LMX) at the individual level (e.g., individual citizenship behaviours, task performance, creativity), team level (e.g., team

<sup>46</sup> Jonathan Pratt, “‘Growing Healthy Churches’: Voices from the Churches,” in *Directions 2012 Research Project* (Epping: NSW & ACT Baptist Churches, 2010).

potency, team performance), and organizational level (e.g., customer satisfaction, return on investment) provide strong evidence in favour of selecting and training leaders to practice servant leadership. It appears that servant leadership is especially well-suited for organizations that desire long-term growth profiles designed to benefit all stakeholders (as opposed to short term profits for shareholders only).<sup>47</sup>

Devaluing leadership in our churches is unbiblical and self-destructive. Leadership is a core component of the work that God gives to pastors and should be considered a high priority. Leadership, when it is enacted in ways that promote the flourishing of others, can facilitate significant positive change, including church health and growth.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has defined leadership biblically as cultivating the conditions in which others can flourish. This definition drew attention to both the work and purpose of leadership. It was argued that this definition of leadership, also called gospel leadership, is justified in the light of both the servant and shepherd biblical frameworks of leadership. Finally, this paper identified why leadership is so important, and why it ought to be prioritised by our church leaders, especially those who seek improved health and growth in their church.

Many Protestant churches in Australia enjoy the fruit of effective preaching and teaching. Yet too many of these same churches are not growing numerically like they should. What could it be like if more of our churches were also blessed with effective leadership? I've seen what this can look like under Michael Dennis. I pray that God will open up more opportunities for effective training and development in leadership, just as he has in preaching and teaching, so the conditions might be cultivated for all of God's people to flourish under Christ.

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<sup>47</sup> Eva et al., "Servant Leadership: A systematic review and call for future research.", 128.

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## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

### **Appendix 1. Healthy Churches**

Download: <https://gospelleadership.com/article/33148-leadership-foundations-for-christian-leaders/attachment/84166.docx>

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### **Appendix 2. Leaders as Shepherds**

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