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What Church Leadership Should Look Like

Judah Ben-Hur is a fictional character of a Jewish man in the times of Jesus who was wrongly accused of attempting to kill a Roman official. The judgment against him causes him to be sent as a slave to the Roman army. It is a beautiful story of redemption in his journey back to freedom and his family. The family, in the end, is converted to Christianity. The novel “Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ” was published in 1880 and was one of the most popular books of its time.

I first fell in love with the story after watching a version of the movie adaptation from 1956 with Charlton Heston playing the lead character. In this movie, they show an intense scene with him in a Roman warship, giving a Hollywood version glimpse into the life of a Roman slave. When I saw this small example of the horrible treatment and conditions, it was an eye-opener to the reality of Roman slavery. The slaves are crammed into the very bottom of the ship, lined up in many rows and groups of three, with one group on each side of the ship. In the middle is a narrow walkway for the soldiers to walk back and forth with whips to hit the slaves if they are too slow. In the front, a man sits facing the slaves with a drum in which he beats at the pace they are to row. Each slave is almost naked and shackled by his feet to the ship and his hands to his oar. There is no mercy for them as they are the extra power to move the warship into battle, continually demanded to row. It really is a sobering image of the life of a slave in the Roman army that still sticks in my mind today. These slaves were called the under-rowers as they were under the ship deck, and they were bound to the will of their captors.

I hope I did an adequate job of painting the image of the under-rower slave in the Roman Empire because next, I want to show you scriptures of how the Apostles of the church should also look. Using the Apostle Paul’s opinion and not my own or that of the many modern-day church leaders. Unfortunately, if the view from the office of the apostle is skewered, it will affect the entire church’s opinion of itself. It is essential for us to have a close look at how Paul viewed himself and his office regarding the church.

I’ve personally heard many sermons on how the apostle is the highest position in the church, and we must hold them up in the highest esteem. I do believe in honoring people, but I won’t go into details about some of the ridiculous demands that some people make because they are called to be the mighty apostle. As proof that they are number one, they like to quote the verse from 1 Corinthians 12:28, “*And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues.*” They might say something like, “see, my position is highest, so therefore you must obey and submit to me,” but we don’t want to learn from them because we can learn directly from the Apostle Paul himself.

Chapter four comes before chapter twelve, and Paul says that apostles are to be considered LAST in the church. He compares their way of leadership to the way the Holy Spirit

taught him. 1 Corinthians 4:7-9, *“For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you! For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.”*

Why is there such a discrepancy between the two styles of leadership? So much of our modern church system is built the world’s way, much like a pyramid, with a few on top and everyone else on the bottom. However, I believe that the church structure is to look the opposite, with the main leaders being underneath, strengthening everyone else. Paul shares his leadership principles when he says that the apostles are not to act like kings who reign over others but to be humble and acknowledge that everything they have was received by God’s grace, including being displayed last.

When we read all of these chapters together, we can understand that when he states that the apostles are first, he doesn’t mean like the highest and greatest but first to lay down their life. When I build a brick house, the first brick laid down eventually becomes the bottom brick as others are placed upon it, and this is how I interpret this scripture. God’s design is that the apostle lifts up the entire body of Christ by laying down his life first and allowing the church to be built upon the doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

He wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:1-2, *“Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.”* Here he is asking the church to look at him and other leaders and apostles as servants of Christ. The Greek word for servant here is *“hypēretēs,”* which is the exact same word used to describe the under-rower, a slave at the bottom of the Roman warship. Paul’s definition of a true apostle is the same as a slave chained to the oars, a person found at the bottom and not at the top. It’s vital for us to see the cost of leadership in the body of Christ as a position of willfully submitting our life to God’s will and service to His people. As we grow in God, we will always become more of a servant than a king.

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