

What Christians Do That's Different

Christian or not, all leaders do certain things. In a letter to one of his associates, Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, described a leader's function like this: "The all-important thing to do is to: (1) improve the character of the work; (2) remove stones of stumbling, if possible; (3) oil the wheels where they stick; (4) amend whatever is defective; (5) supplement, as far as may be, what is lacking." As J. Oswald Sanders has pointed out, this simple statement outlines five basic responsibilities of a leader: administration, group morale, personal relationships, problem solving, and creative planning (*Spiritual Leadership*, pp. 137-38).

Before we move too fast, however, we need to pay closer attention to Hudson Taylor's concluding wish: "That I may be used of God . . . to bring this to pass." That is to say, even when Christians do what other leaders do, they do it differently. For Taylor, this includes being "used of God." But can we be more specific? Yes, we can. According to 1 Timothy 1:3-11, Christian leaders stand out from other leaders in at least three ways.

First, a Christian leader "promote[s] . . . God's work—which is by faith" (1 Tim. 1:4). "God's work" could also be translated "God's way of ordering things." It's a reference to the way God intends the world to be, as an expression of his redemptive reign. Jesus defined it like this: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Like Timothy, Christian leaders are commissioned to promote God's kingdom work. They do this in specific places (like Ephesus), in specific times (like today), and in specific circumstances (like your own). Regardless, kingdom focus is one of the things that set Christian leaders apart.

A second factor that sets Christian leadership apart is its "goal . . . [of] love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5). Commentator Phillip Towner explains that "love" in this verse is "shorthand for the entire visible, outward life." That's important to note. But what captures us as leaders are the three sources of this behavior:

- a heart that's cleansed and inclined to love like Christ
- a conscience that's alert to what Christian love is and does
- a faith that's sincere in its desire to please God by loving in the way he asks

Whatever attitudes and concerns Christian leaders share with other leaders, this "inward-to-outward" goal of distinctively Christian love clearly sets us apart (1 Tim. 1:5).

But are these three motives something we as leaders can produce? Produce, no (only God can do that); cultivate, yes (for example, we can "plant," "water," and "build," cf. 1 Cor. 3:5-10). That brings us to the third and final factor 1 Timothy mentions that distinguishes Christian leaders from others. Their leadership is rooted in "sound doctrine [lit., 'healthy teaching'] that conforms to the glorious gospel" (1:10-11)—the gospel that is the power of God (Rom. 1:16). This statement exposes the falsity of the view that tries to divorce leadership from teaching, as if the two were opponents rather than allies.

So, is leading the church the same as leading anything else? The answer is "Yes"—and "No." In many ways, church leadership is just like leading anything else. With Hudson Taylor, we can agree that all leaders share in such common tasks as administration, problem solving, creative planning—you name it. However, in some vital respects, Christian leadership is very different. Unlike other leaders, Christian leaders:

- promote God's work—which is by faith
- target love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith
- rely on healthy teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of God

As a result, even when Christian leaders do what other leaders do, they do it in a way that sets their leadership apart.

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For more information on indicators of church health, check out the website at <http://www.efca.org/health/index.html> or email Jim at jim.fann@efca.org.