Intoxicating Vision: The Affects of Leading Under the Influence

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Abstract

High-profile ecclesial leadership failures are often reduced to sexual or financial indiscretions. However, there is more to moral failure then the conventional understandings of morality. One could argue that charismatic/visionary leaders must maintain a vital set of disciplines if they are to avoid succumbing to pride, greed, abuse and other negative trappings associated with narcissistic leadership. Should a leader fail in the aforementioned areas, their "dream/vision" may become a “drug” that leads to unhealthy and immoral leadership practices. A brief outline of Acts 6:1-6, 1 Timothy 3:1-13, 2 Timothy 2:1-13, and Titus 1:5-9 reveals several qualifying traits and principles for ecclesial leadership that may also serve as safeguards against vision-driven moral failure.

*Keywords*: moral, leadership, ecclesial, narcissistic, charismatic
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Organizational power has the potential to influence ecclesial leaders in an intoxicating manner. After all, ecclesial leaders are “called by God”, given a “vision”, and “set apart” for the unique task of leading God’s people. One could argue that the realm of ecclesial leadership is the perfect venue for the reinforcement of the grandiose self, which includes overt and covert narcissism (Sperry and Sperry, 2011). Surprisingly, there is very little research that connects organizational vision, narcissism, and ecclesial leadership. In fact, vision-driven leadership is not restricted to corporate boardrooms or the frontlines of Fortune 500 companies (Nichols, 2007). This article explores the various ways in which narcissistic leadership interacts with organizational vision in ecclesial leaders. The qualifications for ecclesial leadership found within the Christian Scriptures may provide a type of “antidote” to the influence of unchecked vision.

There are several instances within the Sacred Text where vision works hand-in-hand with God’s chosen leadership. A clearly articulated vision allows ecclesial leaders to motivate followers toward collective goals via descriptions of what “could be” (Nichols, 2007). The recent emphasis on church growth, coupled with a growing interest in the applicability of leadership theory in ecclesial settings has produced a new culture of vision-driven leadership within the church (Nichols, 2007). Although vision is an important factor of leadership it may also manipulate leadership behaviors. For example, charismatic leaders provide followers with a role model for ethical behavior while at the same time communicating a clear vision that is infectious (Babcock-Roberson and Strickland, 2010). However, if left unchecked, the unexamined passions of the leader may enslave followers via egocentric manipulation disguised as vision casting (Heuser and Klaus, 1998; Tilstra, 2010). History proves that some charismatic leaders have a
tendency to give in to the temptation of spiritual, political, organizational, and economic power all in the name of the vision (Heuser and Klaus, 1998).

**Charismatic Leadership, Vision, and Narcissistic Creep**

Research suggests that on some levels, there is a connection between leadership style and narcissism (Stein, 2013). For example, charismatic leaders serve as a “light-house” that followers look to for confidence, guidance, assurance, and meaningfulness (Babcock-Roberson and Strickland 2010). Charismatic leadership is built upon the proposition that power is not so much possessed as it is attributed to “natural” leaders who “rise to the occasion” in times of uncertainty, distress, or extreme enthusiasm (Milosevic and Bass, 2014). Although the concept of charisma is rooted in the Pauline concept of “a divinely inspired gift”, the term was first used by Weber to describe a type of influence that is based on follower perceptions and not specific leadership titles or positions (Yukl, 2013; Milosevic and Bass, 2014; Muthiah, 2010).

Charismatic leaders articulate a clear and appealing vision, have strong communication skills, take personal risks in order to attain the vision, express optimism and confidence in followers, and appear to be so extraordinary that their followers desire to become like them (Yukl, 2013). Charismatic leadership includes the following dimensions: vision, inspiration, self-sacrifice, integrity, decisiveness and performance orientation, all of which resemble some of the characteristics found in servant leadership and transformational leadership (Dorfman, Javidan, Hanges, Dastmalchian, and House, 2012). However, charismatic leadership may lend itself to narcissism more than servant or transformational leadership. Although charismatic leadership is associated with a wide variety of positive outcomes within organizations ranging from leader effectiveness to job satisfaction, it is also associated with negative outcomes (Hayibor, Agle, Sears, Sonnenfeld, and Ward, 2011). For instance, Yukl (2013) argues that charismatic
leadership is easily exploited for personal gain. A charismatic leader may use ideological
influence, effective communication, and the appearance of self-risk in order to gain power (Yukl,
2013). Once the charismatic leader has power, they may seek to dominate their followers in order
to maintain the attributed power (Yukl, 2013). Research suggests that within ecclesial settings,
transactional methodology can easily shift into charismatic abuse (Rowold, 2008). Perhaps this is
where the intoxicating influence of “vision” overwhelms a leader who may have started with
pure intentions. When the aforementioned takes place, vision-driven leadership begins to take
the form of negative-transactional and authoritarian leadership.

There are examples of positive and negative visionary leaders found in organizations,
historical figures, and even in the Bible (Yukl, 2013). For example Winston Churchill and Adolf
Hitler both employed persuasive communication and an inspirational call to rise against the
status quo during World War II (Yukl, 2013). However, the former inspired a nation to rise
against tyranny while the latter facilitated the murder of millions. Indeed, when coupled with the
power associated with charisma, the drive of vision may inadvertently sabotage ecclesial
leadership. It is important to note that although many associate narcissism with negativity, there
are healthy aspects of narcissism. On could argue that on some level, ecclesial leadership
demands at least some aspect of healthy narcissism. Healthy narcissism includes one’s ability to
distinguish fantasy from reality and a healthy love of self and others (Sperry and Sperry, 2011).
Healthy narcissists have an adequate sense of self-esteem (Sperry and Sperry, 2011). Conversely,
overt narcissism takes the form of selfishness, egocentrism, and an insatiable desire for power,
status, and possession. How does one make the “slide” from healthy to overt narcissism? The
answer may appear in covert narcissism.
Covert narcissists are highly attentive to the needs of others, self-deprecating, and often reflect an attitude of humility (Sperry and Sperry, 2011). However, underneath the surface, covert narcissists desperately crave affirmation, attention, and the fulfillment of their grandiose fantasies (Sperry and Sperry, 2011). Thus, the covert narcissist may use a sense of calling and the vehicle of “vision” in order to reinforce his or her sense of self-importance. In this way, narcissism slowly creeps into the life of the leader until it controls every other aspect of the organization. This is especially true in ecclesial settings, which offer a leader plenty of opportunities to stand at the center of attention while simultaneously feigning humility and deflecting praise (Sperry and Sperry, 2011). This is not to say that all ecclesial leaders are narcissist. However, one could argue that the nature of ecclesial leadership leaves one prone to the aforementioned abuses associated with charismatic leadership and covert narcissism. An exploration of the biblical standards for ecclesial leadership may provide a type of “antidote” to the narcissistic exploitation of organizational vision.

The Biblical Antidote

The highly publicized morale failures of the last 20 years have served as a catalyst for the exploration of spirituality and morality as they relate to leadership (Crowther, 2012). However, it is fair to assume that no leader begins with failure as the ultimate goal. This is especially true of charismatic and visionary leadership, which are both characterized by a desire to bridge the gap between organizational goals and the current reality (Dwivedi, 2006). Vision allows one to rise above certain issues and toward a higher goal (Nichols, 2007). Although vision requires visionaries, it is important to keep a healthy perspective of what a godly visionary looks like (Nichols, 2007). The Christian Scriptures offer four passages related to ecclesial leadership. Each passage contains various qualifications or guiding principles for ecclesial leadership:
“Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenias, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them” (Acts 6:1-9, English Standard Version).

“The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil” (1 Timothy 3:1-13).

“You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops. Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything. Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. The saying is trustworthy, for: ‘If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself’” (2 Timothy 2:1-13).

“This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright,
holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:5-9).

Table 1 summarizes the list of qualifications and traits found in the aforementioned passages.

**Table 1.**

*Qualifications and Guiding Principles for Ecclesial Leaders*

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<td>Good repute</td>
<td>Above reproach</td>
<td>Willingness to suffer</td>
<td>Above reproach</td>
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<tr>
<td>Full of wisdom</td>
<td>Husband of one wife</td>
<td>Hard-working</td>
<td>Husband of one wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full of the Spirit</td>
<td>Sober-minded</td>
<td>Able to teach</td>
<td>Children are believers and behave with honor</td>
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<td>Full of faith</td>
<td>Self-controlled</td>
<td>Not arrogant</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respectable</td>
<td>Not quick tempered</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hospitable</td>
<td>Not a drunkard</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Able to teach</td>
<td>Not violent</td>
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<td>Not quarrelsome</td>
<td>Lover of good</td>
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<td>Not a lover of money</td>
<td>Self-controlled, disciplined</td>
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The common qualities of these four passages stand in stark contrast to the common characteristics of overt/covert narcissism and charismatic abuse. According to the Sacred Text, an ecclesial leader should at a minimum be humble, self-controlled, and capable of teaching and leading. Most importantly, ecclesial leaders must be full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit. In fact, one could argue that it is the fullness of the Spirit that allows a leader to demonstrate any of the qualifications and guiding principles for ecclesial leadership (Galatians 5:22-23). The recent ecclesial emphasis on vision and effective communication in leadership has helped the Church deal with decline and stagnation on a numerical sense (Nichols, 2007). Likewise, an emphasis on the biblical qualifications and guiding principles for church leadership may decrease the occurrences of moral failure amongst ecclesial leaders.

**Summary**

This article explored the various ways in which narcissism, charismatic leadership, and vision interacts with ecclesial leadership. It is beyond the scope of this article to conduct a full exegetical analysis of the four passages related to ecclesial leadership. However, future research via socio-rhetorical criticism may offer a deeper level of insight into the biblical standards for Christian leadership in ecclesial and organizational settings. Furthermore, the qualities listed in Acts 6:1-9, 1 Timothy 3:1-13, 2 Timothy 2:1-13, and Titus 1:5-9 may serve as the foundation for future quantitative exploration into ecclesial leadership.
Stein (2013) argues that environmental downturns serve as a catalyst for deconstructive narcissism, which negatively affects both the leader and the organization. The current culture of uncertainty, which is fueled by social media and a desire for individual “platforms”, all but forces narcissistic withdraw as a primary coping method (Cornelison, 1998). During these times of stress and uncertainty, narcissistic leaders inevitably turn against their followers as a form of self-preservation (Stein, 2013). While it is important for ecclesial leaders to lead with vision, that vision should not be reduced to a “territory” to protect, nor should it be used to inflate the leaders ego (Nichols, 2007). Ecclesial leaders are not afforded the luxury of such selfishness. Ecclesial leaders are called to serve (Mark 10:45). In order to resist the allure of “vision”, it is paramount for ecclesial leaders to return to a biblical paradigm for leadership that emphasizes humility, sacrifice, and self-less service.
INTOXICATING VISION

References


