



## The Supremacy of the Theological Aspect of Leadership

Artem Kliuchnikov

*This article reviews three aspects of leadership: theological, psychological and sociological. The author argues for supremacy of theological aspect and presents evidence, which shows that psychological and sociological aspects of leadership have no lasting positive impact unless the leader is governed by the authority of the Word of God. Through brief leadership vignettes that depict Soviet leadership, Enron leadership, and a person of William Wilberforce author builds his case to show that one is as good of a leader as he is the follower of Christ.*

**Chernobyl.** Many associate this word with pain, agony, and fear. The name of the small Ukrainian town became known to the whole world. While the catastrophe happened on April 26, 1986, the first mention about it in Soviet media was on April 28, and it was very brief. At the time when foreign media was alarming the public to the devastating consequences of this event, Soviet leadership was quiet about it, and encouraged people to celebrate one of the biggest Soviet holidays, Labor Day on May 1. Ukrainian political scientists believe that Chernobyl became the straw that broke the camel's back – it revealed how uncaring and egocentric the leadership of USSR was. The lack of trust that had been building through the years finally reached its critical mass, and the trust was broken completely. USSR is no longer. Lives of millions of people are destroyed.

**Enron.** Unethical leadership of Enron Corporation led to a downfall of this major corporation. Shane Premeaux writes, “The Enron debacle caused by greed, political connections, and unethical actions resulted in a

bankruptcy that shattered the lives and retirement savings of many employees.”<sup>i</sup> However, even before that, the culture, cultivated in this corporation was best described by “perform-or-die.” Kris Hundley gives an example, how one accountant’s wages of \$55,000 worked out to less than \$5 per hour after the number of hours this person has put in working at Enron. When the company collapsed, “Linda Walker, secretary to Enron executives, was given 30 minutes to vacate her desk -- about a minute for every year of service. Bill Peterson learned he was fired while at home recovering from cancer surgery.”<sup>ii</sup> Enron collapse created a notion of *post-Enron era* in leadership studies<sup>iii</sup>, when the scholars try to figure out the characteristics of leadership that will safeguard against major failures in organizations due to the moral downfall of their leaders.

Yet, there are leaders whose lives touched people in very positive and lasting ways. William Wilberforce is a well-known historical figure who fought to abolish slavery. His fight was grounded in the foundational truths of evangelical Christianity. It continued from 1789 until 1833, the very year when he died... the very year when he reached the goal and slavery abolition act passed in the British Parliament.<sup>iv</sup> This is the leader whose life influenced millions and changed the course of history.

Books and articles are written about leaders and their influence on society, organizations, and teams. As leadership vignettes showed, this influence can be either bad or good, and leadership is not a static condition, rather it is a process. This article reviews three components of leadership dynamic: psychological, sociological and theological.

Leadership is a scholarly field, yet it is also a field of human experience and practice. Kurt Lewin once said, “Nothing is as practical as a good theory.”<sup>v</sup> There seems to be certain reciprocity between theory and practice in leadership. Practice informs theory and theory establishes practice. Thus, it is very important to prioritize the sources of influence, the presuppositions that drive the theory and praxis of leadership.

While the example with William Wilberforce goes far into the past, it is not a mere chance that drove the author to this person. One of the first questions that this article answers is where do we begin? Having the three aspects, mentioned above, do we simply put them in unprioritized list? The author believes that as it was in case with William Wilberforce, the theological aspect of leadership should be the driving force behind any other leadership aspect.

### **Theological Aspects of Leadership**

St. Thomas Aquinas spoke of theology as the science about God and all created things in their relationship to God. A famous Russian scientist Lomonosov spoke about science and faith as two sisters, the daughters of the Most High Parent. German astronomer Johannes Kepler spoke of celebrating God in science.<sup>vi</sup> This is not surprising that once theology was known as the Queen of the sciences.

On the practical side, the Old Testament provides very good analysis of what practically constitutes a good and solid leader. The phrases “did which was right” or “did which was evil in sight of the Lord” serve as markers that differentiate leaders. Good-ness or bad-ness of a leader in Biblical times was measured not by what a king did for the nation, but by his relationship with God. It is also noteworthy, that consequently, under the reign of a good king, the people prospered, and under the reign of a bad king, the people suffered. Primarily it happened because the nation followed example of their king. They either followed the Lord, or worshipped idols as their king did. One Russian folk saying states, “The fish rots from its head.” Unfortunately, the history of the Soviet Union proves that. The selfish rule of the communist leaders bred selfishness among Soviet nations. Leunan Dolby writes:

It is clear that communism produced a population intent on survival, a mass of people who would do anything and everything to make sure that they (and their closest) would benefit even to the detriment of others around them. This throw-over of selfishness, however excusable in the past, continues unabated

and in fact is more notable as it operates under a capitalist stance and one could say with a quasi-legal status. Previously this selfishness was for self-preservation, it was in borne from the need to have bread on the table and a roof over the head. Continued today it is for far more, for increased wealth, jobs, cars, position in society and as always there are winners and there are losers. In this instance, the winners are those who get rich at the expense of those who are reduced to living below the bread line (something that the Communists ideal wanted to prevent). It could be argued that the above occurs the world over, but generally speaking laws govern such abuse to the extent that it dampens the overall effect.<sup>vii</sup>

Are there leadership theories that may reflect theological direction in the praxis of leadership? The two that come to mind immediately are spiritual leadership, and servant leadership. Spiritual leadership despite its “spiritual” title does not have much to do with God. Fry speaks about spiritual leadership being different from religion. Spirituality is concerned with love, compassion, tolerance forgiveness, contentment, harmony and responsibility<sup>viii</sup>. Defining servant leadership, Greenleaf writes,

The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions...The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types.<sup>ix</sup>

These goals are virtues in themselves. Yet, the question remains, how does one develop them? How do leaders develop capacity to love, to forgive, to serve? Biblical anthropology of men makes it clear that personal values are the source of human behavior. Luke 6:43-45 says,

For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The

good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks (ESV).

From the Biblical standpoint, all behavior and actions are the result of the heart intentions. Proverbs 4:23 exhorts us to guard our hearts, as that is where the source of life is. Mark 7:21 states, that our actions are based on the condition of our heart. When leader tries to be someone he is not, this will not last. Edward Welch argues that only by engaging the heart one may produce lasting results<sup>x</sup>.

While discussing issue of the heart, it is also important to raise the issue of the standard. Leadership literature speaks about positive leadership. How do we know, what is positive and what is not, and where to learn positive approach? Authentic leadership literature provides an interesting insight, which helps see the post-modern outlook on the truth and absolutes. Kliuchnikov writes,

Another area that requires more attention is what constitutes ethical and moral foundation for an authentic leader. The literature review shows that true *selves* are always moral selves (Cooper, Scandura & Schriesheim, 2005). At the same time Walumbwa, et al (2008) posits that low level of moral development does not allow a leader to become self-aware. It creates inherently illogical pattern. To gain self-awareness, leaders need to be moral, and to grow in morality, leaders need to be growing self-awareness. The author suggests considering static definition of morality rather than using dynamic definitions as a foundation for authentic leadership. The author believes that Judeo-Christian morality provides the depth and breadth of ethical system, suitable for further development of ethical foundation for authentic leadership.<sup>xi</sup>

Biblically, seeking goodness within oneself is futile endeavor. “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10, ESV). Trying to develop the virtues of servanthood, forgiveness, love by relying on your own self, resembles the attempts of baron Münchhausen to pull himself out of the swamp by his own hair.<sup>xii</sup> To develop these

virtues a leader should have an outside frame of reference and outside help. The Bible provides us with the clear image of who we are as individuals and as leaders (James 1:23-25). Thus, the Bible should become the originator of both the theory and praxis of leadership. Theories of leadership will become much deeper and stronger when informed by theological concepts.

### **Psychological Aspects of Leadership**

Encyclopedia Britannica defines psychology as “scientific discipline that studies mental processes and behavior in humans and other animals.”<sup>xiii</sup> The one striking feature of this definition is that humans are equated with *other animals*. The author sees the biggest problem with psychology is that it tries to define a person, explain his or her behavior outside of God’s realm of things. No wonder why leader’s influence over his or her subordinates often has pragmatic motivation. Even transformational leaders “are more concerned with attainment of pragmatic task objectives than with the moral elevation of followers or social reform.”<sup>xiv</sup> If their idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration are motivated by pragmatic reasons, they will strive to influence behavior of the subordinates without affecting their inner world. One may agree with this approach and say that there is nothing bad in it. However, if we look at the Soviet leadership style, we may find that it had all the characteristics of transformational leadership, yet without any concern for inner moral transformation of people.

Northouse defines idealized influence as leaders acting as strong role models for followers.<sup>xv</sup> In the result, followers want to identify with the leadership. While leadership in Soviet Union was not directly accessible, idealized influence was communicated through mottoes, mass media, and posters. Exhibits 1 through 4 represent posters and mottoes that were communicating this influence.

From the posters one may see faces of positive characters doing the right thing. This idealized influence promoted people’s desire to fulfill the obligations that they had before their country. The power of this influence was strong. People were proud to belong to the Soviet Union.

Exhibit 1. The sign says: “and how did you work today”



Exhibit 2. The sign says: “do not do it”



Exhibit 3. The sign says: “Manage well”



Exhibit 4. The sign says: “The deputy is a servant of people.”



Inspirational motivation, according to Northouse, means communicating high expectations to followers.<sup>15</sup> Exhibit 3 is one example of it. In Soviet Union, the praise was used quite frequently. The Stand of Honor was displayed in every single factory and plant, where management would put up pictures of the most productive people. There also was a Stand of Shame, where they would display those who were guilty of constant breaking of certain rules. It is hard to attribute this to transactional leadership, because ultimately the workers did not get any tangible benefits. Through these stands, the leadership of a particular plant tried to inspire their workers to better work ethics and better performance.

Intellectual stimulation was also present in Soviet leadership as it did encourage followers to challenge their own beliefs and to follow the rule of their leadership. It was even allowed to challenge the beliefs and actions of the leadership. Exhibit 5 shows the worker saying to the administration, “be closer to live, to real work.”

Exhibit 5.





Individual consideration is defined as “supportive climate in which they [leaders] listen carefully to the individual needs of followers.”<sup>15</sup> In the Soviet Union, this dynamic was presented by well-known saying: “from each according to his ability, to each according to his contribution.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Despite these four characteristics of transformational leadership, it produced the labor force that is well known by its laziness and ineffectiveness. Valery Bekhter, a director of a production company in Moscow says that one of the hardest things to deal with is “soviet mentality.” When an Italian worker assembles a chair in 30 minutes, it takes 3 days to do the same job for a Russian worker.<sup>xvii</sup> It is apparent that psychology without the support of inner values fails. Luke 6:40 states, “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher” (ESV). What can be observed in history of the USSR is that people during the communist era became “fully trained” in the deceitful ways of their leaders.

Orthodox Church teaches that fellowship among people has underlying morality. In John 15:5 Jesus says, “For apart from me you can do nothing.” This includes inability to build lasting change and teach lasting values in interpersonal interactions among leaders and their followers. St. Dorotheus spoke about three kinds of lies: (1) lying by words, (2) lying by thoughts, (3) lying by life. The first one describes deliberate distortion of facts, the second one is unintentional self-deceit, and the third one represents cynical vice, when a person covers his motives with seeming virtue.<sup>xviii</sup> Soviet people eventually saw that their leadership was lying to them, that all of these mottoes and virtues were empty, as they did not resemble the true values that the leadership held.

### **Sociological Aspects**

Sociology studies societies and processes that preserve and change them. It looks at the social institutions and organizations that regulate human behavior.<sup>xix</sup> Sociology went through a few stages of development, and interestingly enough one of the founders of this scientific field was Herbert Spencer, who coined the phrase “survival of the fittest.” At its conception, sociology reflected *social Darwinism*, “the theory

that persons, groups, and races are subject to the same laws of natural selection as Charles Darwin had perceived in plants and animals in nature.”<sup>xx</sup> Later on other theories replaces social Darwinism. Economic determinism, human ecology, social psychology to name a few. Since the whole premise of sociology is that humans lack the instincts that govern most animal behavior, and therefore they learn from social institutions and organizations, this article will focus on social learning theory, which states that people learn from “environmental influences, rather than by innate or internal forces.”<sup>xxi</sup>

Based on this theory, we may state that subordinates in the organization learn by observing their leaders and other subordinates. The newcomers may learn by observing what behavior is rewarded and what behavior is reprimanded. “Perform or die” organizational culture of Enron reflected social Darwinism. It did not reflect the nice sounding Enron slogan that they printed on T-shirts, coffee mugs and so on: Respect, Integrity, Community, Excellence.<sup>xxii</sup> Here is how Enron’s ethic code described these values:

Respect. We treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves. We do not tolerate abusive or disrespectful treatment. Ruthlessness, callousness and arrogance don’t belong here.

Integrity. We work with customers and prospects openly, honestly and sincerely. When we say we will do something, we will do it; when we say we cannot or will not do something, then we won’t do it.

Communication. We have an obligation to communicate. Here we take the time to talk with one another . . . and to listen. We believe that information is meant to move and that information moves people.

Excellence. We are satisfied with nothing less than the very best in everything we do. We will continue to raise the bar for everyone. The great fun here will be for all of us to discover just how good we can really be.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Is this what newcomers were exposed to when they first started working at Enron? Sherron Watkins, the Vice President of Corporate Development at the Enron Corporation says, “Enron’s unspoken message was, ‘Make

the numbers, make the numbers, make the numbers—if you steal, if you cheat, just don’t get caught. If you do, beg for a second chance, and you’ll get one.”<sup>23</sup> Enron’s story shows that sociological aspect of leadership does not stand a chance to provide ethical direction if there is no inner moral God-ward stance in leader’s life. Ultimately, Soviet and Enron mottos had one thing in common: their mottoes were false, as they did not represent the true inner essence of the leaders. 2 Timothy 3:5 describes such people, “having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.” St. Ephraem the Syrian speaks about this verse, “these people reject the very truth they promote, they follow their lusts and they enslave others to their lies and deceit.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Shane Premeaux writes, “In 2003, after the collapse of Enron, the results of an investigation of management behavior and ethical linkages indicated that the collapse and ensuing scandal *did not alter managerial behavior to a significant degree*. Will actual convictions, jail time, and even death alter the way that managers approach ethical situations, and actually change their decision-making process?”<sup>1</sup> (emphasis added). Later on, answering this question he states, that Enron scandal caused managers to adopt a strategic attitude towards the law, but did not cause the resurgence of moral considerations. This conclusion loudly speaks about the nature of social learning, as managers learn to adopt their behavior to the rules that regulate their actions, but it does not bring the internal values change. This fact emphasizes the priority of leadership aspects, where theological aspect goes first, and psychological and sociological ones follow. The heart of a leader, or in other words, his inner desires and values, is actively involved in leadership process. The inner world governs all exterior actions of a leader.

Learning from leaders who broke the law may not be good for a person. Virtues are not learnt by abiding by law. Rather we should learn from the lives of virtuous leaders who while following the letter of the Law, first were following the Spirit of God and the Word of God. October 28, 1787 William Wilberforce wrote in his

diary that “God had set before him two great objectives: the suppression of the slave trade and the work of moral reform”<sup>xxv</sup> He became a politician, unlike many that we know. He became the politician whose main objective was to promote the values of the Kingdom in his time and generation. Based on the example of Wilberforce we may say that the primary objective of a *positive* leader is not to make money, but to *make meaning*. This meaning comes from knowing God and following His leadership. One is as good of a leader as he is a follower of Christ. This is where theology plays primary role. However, it is not the theology as an intellectual stimulus, but the theology as spiritual experience of personal relationship with God.

- 
- <sup>i</sup> Premeaux, S. (2009). The link between management behavior and ethical philosophy in the wake of the Enron convictions. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 85, 13-25.
- <sup>ii</sup> Hundley, K. (2002). Enron's crushing blow. *St. Petersburg Times*. Retrieved October 25, 2009 from [http://www.sptimes.com/2002/02/10/Business/Enron\\_s\\_crushing\\_blow.shtml](http://www.sptimes.com/2002/02/10/Business/Enron_s_crushing_blow.shtml)
- <sup>iii</sup> May, D.R., Hodges, T.D., Chan, A.Y.L., Avolio, B.J (2003). Developing the moral component of authentic leadership. *Organizational Dynamics*, 32(3), 247-260.
- <sup>iv</sup> Wilberforce, William. (2009). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Student and Home Edition*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.
- <sup>v</sup> Lewin K. *Field theory in social science: Selected theoretical papers*. New York, NY: Harper & Row; 1951.
- <sup>vi</sup> Christianity. (2009). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Student and Home Edition*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.
- <sup>vii</sup> Dolby, L. (2007). The Russian mentality. Retrieved October 25, 2009 from <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/russian-mentality.html>
- <sup>viii</sup> Fry, L.W. (2003). Toward a theory of spiritual leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 14(6), 693-727.
- <sup>ix</sup> Greenleaf center for servant leadership. Retrieved October 25, 2009 from <http://www.greenleaf.org/whatis/>
- <sup>x</sup> Welch, E.T. (1991). Why ask, "why?" Four types of causes in counseling. *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, 10(3), 40-47.
- <sup>xi</sup> Kliuchnikov, A. (2009). *Authentic leadership: construct in development*. Regent University.
- <sup>xii</sup> Münchhausen, Baron. (2009). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Student and Home Edition*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.
- <sup>xiii</sup> psychology. (2009). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Student and Home Edition*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica
- <sup>xiv</sup> Yukl, G. (2006). *Leadership in organizations* (6<sup>th</sup> Ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall
- <sup>xv</sup> Northouse, P.G. (2004). *Leadership: theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications
- <sup>xvi</sup> Economic planning. (2009). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Student and Home Edition*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Soviet mentality is in the way. Retrieved October 26, 2009 from [http://www.businesspress.ru/newspaper/article\\_mId\\_1\\_aId\\_351883.html](http://www.businesspress.ru/newspaper/article_mId_1_aId_351883.html)
- <sup>xviii</sup> St. Dorotheus (1990). *Teachings good for the soul*. Svyato-Troitskaya Lavra.
- <sup>xix</sup> Sociology. (2009). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Student and Home Edition*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.
- <sup>xx</sup> Social Darwinism. (2009). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Student and Home Edition*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Social learning. (2009). Encyclopædia Britannica. *Encyclopædia Britannica 2009 Student and Home Edition*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica.
- <sup>xxii</sup> McMahan, T. (2005). Inside the Enron Culture. Retrieved October 31, 2009 from [http://www.tommcmahan.net/2005/02/inside\\_the\\_enro.html](http://www.tommcmahan.net/2005/02/inside_the_enro.html)

<sup>xxiii</sup> Enron: What Caused the Ethical Collapse? Retrieved October 31, 2009 from [http://academic.cengage.com/resource\\_uploads/downloads/0324589735\\_170401.doc](http://academic.cengage.com/resource_uploads/downloads/0324589735_170401.doc)

<sup>xxiv</sup> St. Ephraem the Syrian. Commentary to the Second Epistle to Timothy. Retrieved October 31, 2009 from <http://www.rusbible.ru/books/2tim.es.html#cite-47>

<sup>xxv</sup> Wilberforce, W. (2006). *Real Christianity*. Ventura, CA: Regal.