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## The Leadership Crisis In The Black Church: The Search For The Right Pastor

Since the emergence of the Black Church out of slavery in this country the black preacher has been viewed as the unchallenged leader of the Black Church and the Black community. In these modern times, however, the leadership role of the Black pastor is coming under tremendous scrutiny and condemnation. The challenge, in some cases, is emerging from within the Black Church itself. The Black pastor is no longer the only authority, or source of leadership in the Black community. Blacks today are seeking advice from their lawyers, doctors, psychiatrists, financial consultants, and other professionals. The preacher no longer has the final say in all matter concerning the church and the community. The Black preacher of today must take God's vision for the Church to the church officers for their approval, and those who hold these offices may be better educated than the pastor. The Black pastor of today, therefore, is finding that he or she is being challenged as never before.

There is a crisis in Black Church leadership. A crisis of such proportion that the subject must be addressed. The purpose of this paper is to propose new ways of looking at leadership in the

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African American Church.

In a most interesting work, *The Naked Public Square*, Richard Neuhaus has enunciated a concept that is of particular interest. Neuhaus argues correctly that, "power abhors a vacuum."<sup>1</sup> The book is based on the premise that if no one of legitimate authority occupies the public square (or any arena where policy is made and proclaimed), something or somebody will eventually invade and control it. This is true in government and also in the church and particularly in the Black Church. The Black congregation and the pastorate are undergoing a tremendous metamorphosis as Black society re-examines its traditional understanding of the American way of life and how African Americans are to fit into the larger society.

The congregation and its pastor are not immune to this scrutiny, nor to the subsequent changes that will occur as a result of this re-examination. No longer will the well-educated, mobile, and sophisticated Black man or woman believe or do everything the pastor suggests. As never before, Black pastors are being required to justify their decisions, actions, and even their existence. This author concludes, therefore, that if the pastor does not adequately rise to the occasion there will be the vacuum of which Neuhaus speaks in the pulpit as the African American Church approaches the 21st century. This would also mean that eventually a vacuum would open up in the African American community that would have to be filled. The clergy can no longer assume they have "perpetuity" of leadership in the church and the community. While Neuhaus is not African American, nor is he speaking directly to the Black Church and its pastors, he has nevertheless captured the gist of the Black pastor's dilemma at this time. I have no disagreement

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<sup>1</sup>Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), p. 31.

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with Neuhaus when he writes:

In churches there is no evident constituency demand for a return to the past. The conflict between leadership direction and a church membership is now exposed for all to see. Leaders may strike a position of prophetic protest for a time. But leaders who intend to remain in positions of believable leadership must after a while move toward their constituencies. Otherwise they will be viewed not as leaders but as leftovers, not as prophets, but as stubbornly wrongheaded.<sup>2</sup>

This will be the fate of the uninformed and unchanging pastor who stubbornly refuses to acknowledge, accept, and cope with a changing Black society and Church. This new pastor must be cognizant of the various models that can be employed to accommodate a better educated and more informed black congregation.

Let us now identify some alternatives to the traditional Black pastoral role model of the "divine authoritarian."

## II.

Strictly speaking, there are only four basic leadership styles when all insignificant variations are stripped away. These can be categorized as follows:

1. The autocratic leader who tells subordinates what to do and expects to be obeyed without question.
2. The participative leader who involves subordinates in

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 42.

decision-making, but may retain final authority.

3. The democratic leader who tries to do what the majority of subordinates desire.

4. The laissez-faire leader who is uninvolved in the work of the unit.<sup>3</sup>

There are, of course, many variations and derivatives of these four styles, but all leadership models can eventually be traced back to these four. For example, Renis Likert has developed a leadership theory that uses the following typology: (1) Exploitative Autocratic, (2) Benevolent Autocratic, (3) Consultative, and (4) Participative Team.<sup>4</sup> Blake and Mouton have what they term a Managerial Grid which moves from Impoverished Management to Authority-Obedience, to Country Club Management and further<sup>5</sup> into the Organization Man Management type, and finally the Team Management type. Hershey and Blanchard identified leadership with the situation and maturity of the follower.<sup>6</sup> Hence they conclude that one's leadership style may vary in many forms, such as High Relationship and Low Task, High Task and High Relationship, Low Relationship and Low Task, and High Task and Low Relationship.<sup>7</sup>

These secular concepts have not escaped the attention of prominent church scholars. Many church administrators have come to the realization that a leadership vacuum will occur if church leaders do not integrate the above concepts and employ them in

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<sup>3</sup>R. Wayne Mondy, Arthur Sharplin, Robert E. Holmes and Edwin B. Flippo, *Management Concepts and Practices* (Mass: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1986), p. 314

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 316-319.

<sup>5</sup>Robert R. Blake and Jane Srygley Mouton, *The Managerial Grid*, (Houston: Gulf Publishing Company, 1985), p. 12.

<sup>6</sup>Paul Hershey and Kenneth H. Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1977), pp. 100-101.

<sup>7</sup>Mondy, *Management Concepts*, p. 283.



church management. The concepts cited above can be readily understood and applied in a Christian church context. Such a transition brings to mind Loren Broadus and his altogether appropriate question: "What in the world does theology have to do with leadership?"<sup>8</sup>

Broadus and other thoughtful church leaders have come to the realization that the church is an organization that is by no means immune to the basic concepts of management. Just as any manager must be concerned about the people who work for him or her, so must the modern day pastor come to a similar conclusion. The effective Black pastor must recognize that he or she does have a specific leadership style and he or she must not abdicate the responsibility to lead. Broadus concluded that the minister's "leadership style communicates his theology and dictates the way he leads with people."<sup>9</sup>

With this basic understanding of the pastor as one who must deliberately choose an effective leadership model for his or her pastorate, let us now examine several models that may be appropriate for consideration by the contemporary African American pastor.

### **Suggested Black Pastoral Role Models for the 1990s**

It should be noted from the outset that while I will suggest several role models for today's Black pastor, I have a definite preference for the model of servant-leader. This seems to me to be clearly the best model by which authority and humility can be exercised and demonstrated simultaneously. I believe that this is

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<sup>8</sup>Loren Broadus, "What in the World Does Theology Have to do with Leadership?", *The Lexington Theological Quarterly* (July 1978), p. 73.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 75.

the style that holds out the greatest possibility for success in a changing Black Church and society.

The Black church is best defined as "a Black congregation whose government is in the hands of Blacks."<sup>10</sup> The Black writer who gave us this practical definition of the Black or African American Church would concur with me that the Black Church of today is in no present danger of being controlled by Whites, nor are Black clergy in danger of being replaced by White clergy. It is clear that Black congregations prefer Black pastors. Mack Carter is convinced that something is needed and must be done to increase the literacy of the Black congregant, to deepen the faith of Black church members today. I strongly agree. Blacks want to be more informed about the Christian faith and they desire a better informed and more sophisticated pastor. The day of uninformed whooping and emotionality from an almost illiterate Black preacher is rapidly drawing to a close. Black Christians still demand emotive services, but they are now demanding more: a "full course meal" with the "gravy," and not just a "pie in the sky theology."

The new African American religious thought for the 1990s will demand what I have called a "full circle Christian faith." Such a faith will require new leadership stances and new directions to be initiated by the Black pastor. The former "divine authoritarian" model, traditionally displayed in the Black pastorate, will no longer serve the purposes of the pastor of a contemporary African American congregation. I would, therefore, propose the following role models in the order of my own preference for the Black pastor of this last decade of the 20th century.

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<sup>10</sup>Mack King Carter, "Establishing A Program for Catechismus at the Green Castle Baptist Church, Prospect, Kentucky," D. Min. Project, 1978, p. 4.



The Servant-Leader Style. This is a style of pastoral leadership that emphasizes a servant attitude, yet at the same time, presents a strong, authoritative stance. The servant-leader model will allow the pastor to give decisive leadership to his or her congregation while at the same time maintaining an attitude of humble service. It is characterized by participation by the congregation in decision-making with the secure knowledge that the people are being led by a well-informed and educated pastor. This model insures that the pastor retains final veto power in most decisions. The congregation agrees to accord him or her such a privilege because of the common belief in the community that Blacks need and perform best under a strong and well-informed leader. Our people will normally follow such a leader because he or she leads through love. This is close to the participative style mentioned earlier, because in this instance the pastor participates with the congregation by acting in a servant role, yet displaying strong leadership capabilities.

This leadership model brings into tension the two ideals that Jesus expressed in his own ministry: servanthood and authority. These two ideals appear to be paradoxical. Two dimensions of leadership that never meet. In Christ, however, they not only meet, but accommodate and complement each other, not as parallel, but intersecting characteristics of ministry. Similarly, the successful pastor today must be invested with a certain authority in discharging his or her responsibilities, while at the same time being a servant. This is seen in the shepherd motif, for the shepherd sternly rebukes and guides the flock, yet at the first sign of danger defends it and is willing to lay his or her life down for that flock. The point that must be made here is that Jesus displayed an unquestioned authority in his ministry tempered by the attitude and performance of servanthood.

What an excellent example by which to fashion one's

leadership style! The servant-leader helps his or her people to grow and better benefit themselves and society as a whole through service and leadership brought together. What better way to serve Christ and humanity than to lead as servant! The servant-leader is not powerless, but rather receives power by virtue of serving as Christ himself served, hence drawing authority (*exousia*) from service itself and, thereby, achieving the necessary prerequisites for faithful and effective leadership.

*The Systems/Crisis Style.* The basic intent of Systems Theory in this context is to produce well-integrated and functioning persons whose lives are significantly related to God. The purpose of Crisis Theory is to change crisis into an opportunity of personal growth and the accomplishment of God's purposes. A crisis is a turning point and, thereby, an opportunity for either increased growth or recessive deterioration. A crisis in this sense is a temporarily insurmountable obstacle in the way of the achievement of one's life goals. It is unamenable to customary methods of problem-solving. The Black pastor leads by showing members of the congregation how God's liberating powers can break into their lives and move them toward personal and collective development—growth toward others and toward God.

This model is closest to the *laissez-faire* style of leadership because the pastor maintains a free and relatively unstructured relationship to the congregation. The main purpose here is to act as a resource person. The pastor presents himself or herself as more of a "people-oriented" person than a "task-oriented" person. The prime motivation is not to achieve high visibility as a strong authoritarian, but rather low-keyed relationship to persons as a counselor and stimulator of persons toward spiritual growth.

*The Sophisticated Political Activist.* The Reverend Jesse Jackson

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clearly embodies this leadership style. It is admirably suited to the eloquent and well-educated Black pastor who seeks to play a central role in the political arena. It demands a dynamic, forceful leadership that appeals to all segments of the Black masses. The pastor is not restricted to the local situation, but actively pursues cultural, political, economic, and social values for the race at the state, regional, and national levels. This style of pastoral leadership was exemplified in the ministries of the late Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and the late Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Today it is observable in the style of the Reverend Andrew Young of Atlanta. I would describe the essence of this model as requiring thorough acquaintance with the electoral process and with the political process in general. One of its purposes is to use power wisely, to be able to both serve and placate the masses, getting them to "vote your way" by means of the pastor's sophisticated use of politics.

*The Intellectual Expert.* We all know that expertise is one of the most effective forms of power in any organization. In this style of leadership the current day pastor relies on his or her specialized knowledge of an area of particular and often critical importance to the congregation and community. Such a pastor will frequently rule in an autocratic manner.

It is this writer's considered opinion that any of the four models mentioned above: (1) The Servant Leader, (2) The Systems/Crisis Leader, (3) The Sophisticated Political Activist, or (4) The Intellectual Expert, would adequately suffice to replace the outdated "divine authoritarian" model that has traditionally described the Black pastor, and continues to be employed by many Black pastors today. I have, however, already indicated my prefer-

ence in this list and will now make concluding comments related to the servant-leader style of leadership.

Any role model can lend itself to abuse. This potential for abuse is what Ernest White has most astutely characterized as, "idolatry."<sup>11</sup> It would be a sad commentary if the Black pastorate, which through the years has remained faithful to the Word of God and sought against great odds to model the teachings of Jesus, would at this time in history abandon that which has brought it safely thus far. I believe that any of the above-mentioned models, except servant-leader model, can readily be abused by even the most well-intentioned Black pastor. This is what Ernest White has seen happen in his own denomination in recent years. He notes that:

The idolatry potential in leadership models sketched above appears when the means of leadership becomes the ends to be worshipped. Leadership by organization, office, or image are means. Yet, they can become so effective and prized that they and their leadership defy moral inspection or Christian reflection.<sup>12</sup>

White has accurately captured what can happen if proper care and choice are not exercised in selecting an appropriate Black pastoral leadership role model in any African American congregation or denomination today. The same authority on church leadership puts it this way: "Human worth forms the foundation for building Christian leadership and determines the use of its power."<sup>13</sup>

This writer would personally choose a leadership model that has the least potential for abuse and the greatest probability of

<sup>11</sup>Ernest O. White, "The Crises in Christian Leadership," *Review and Expositor*, LXXXIII (1986), p. 553.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 552.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 553.



success. Accordingly, the preferred leadership model for today is that of the servant-leader. The Church is not here to abuse or misuse the authority and power with which Christ has endowed it, but rather to lift humankind. The African American community wants and needs more from its churches in this day and time than ever before. As Black society changes, the Black Church must also change, not in the sense of changing as the world changes, but to change the world.

Christ has called us to unite and serve all humankind, White and Black. Strong leadership with the right motivation and role modeling is required. We need authoritative pastoral leadership in a servanthood model. That is what Rogers and McKim mean when they speak of "recovering the foundations of the central Christian tradition."<sup>14</sup>

The attempt of the Black Church today to be a change agent, to change people's lives for the sake of Jesus Christ, must lead not only to conversion, but lead *after* their conversion. This will not happen without a correct style of leadership. The men and women who serve as pastors in Black churches today must link personality traits such as self-confidence, intelligence, and dependability, with a knowledge of leadership styles, and how they can become faithful and effective leaders in this closing decade of the 20th century.

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<sup>14</sup>Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 457.