

# Effective Christian Leadership for Today: Key Aspects, Stages & More

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It's hard to think of a more important topic for the church today than leadership. Doctrine matters. Cultural exegesis matters. Scriptural fidelity matters.

But without Scripture-soaked, servant-minded leaders at every level of the church, God's people struggle.

Ed Stetzer writes,

“Leadership matters to God. God chooses and uses leaders. Leadership matters to churches. God uses leaders within churches to lead people to that which he desires them to engage. The lack of leadership development is, in my view, one of the primary reasons churches plateau. Too many pastors are incapable (or unwilling) to identify and cultivate leaders within the church. They struggle mightily just to recruit workers! But, until pastors are able and willing to train leaders and leaders of leaders, the church will always stop growing at the furthest reaches of the pastor's own ability to work.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet the need for godly leadership isn't an invention of the modern world. A lack of leadership—whether because of ineptitude or absence—is often coupled with Israel's straying from her God-given mission. The clearest example of this is in Judges when the Bible says, “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did whatever seemed right to him” (21:25 CSB).

Without godly leadership, God's people tend to ignore God's ways.

On this page, we'll work through several different aspects of Christian leadership. Feel free to navigate ahead to the topics that interest you most:

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## **What Christian leadership is—and what it isn't**

### **What is Christian leadership?**

A. D. Clarke writes in his article on leadership in the [New Dictionary of Biblical Theology](#) that all leadership is “framed within the overarching context of divine sovereignty.” Christian leadership—whether within the church, business, government, or the home—gets its foundation from the authority God himself has. Whether Christian or secular, all leaders are stewards of the authority given to them by God.

Peter Drucker aptly says about leadership, “The only definition of a leader is someone who has followers.” But Christian leadership has a higher purpose in mind. Christian leaders aren't simply moving people toward morally and spiritually ambiguous goals. Christian leaders seek to serve others and marshal them toward a goal ordained by God.

Pastors, authors, and academics have been defining Christian leadership for decades. Understanding its importance in the life of the church and toward the completion of the mission of God in the world, church leaders have tried to describe it in helpful ways.

[Robert Clinton](#), longtime professor of leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary, offers a noteworthy definition of leadership: “Leadership is a dynamic process in which a man or woman with God-given capacity influences a specific group of God's people toward his purposes for the group.”

Ed Stetzer offers one of the best recent definitions of Christian leadership : “Christian leadership is a process of influencing a community to use their God-given gifts toward a goal and purpose as led by the Holy Spirit.”


At the heart of any differentiation of Christian leadership and secular leadership is the idea of purpose. Christian leaders move people toward a Christ-honoring goal.

That's why Ken Blanchard, the best-selling author of *Lead Like Jesus*, explains that Christian leadership aims at the heart of the leader first: “Every tactical problem, whether at home or in the workplace, can be traced to heart issues within the leader: weak character, fear, pride, not being able to distinguish right from wrong, or misplaced priorities.” He adds, “The heart of a leader must be transformed before any other lasting personal and organizational change can take place.”

The heart of Christian leadership is the heart of the Christian leader.

### **What Christian leadership isn't**



The concept of Christian leadership alludes to something deeper than simply a leader who happens to be a Christian. It encompasses the timeless Christian ideals of service, stewardship, shepherding, and humility.

The 12 apostles—people who were called to lead God's people after Jesus' resurrection—exemplified both healthy and unhealthy leadership. [Mark 9:33–37](#)  recounts a time when these same apostles were arguing over who was the greatest. Jesus reminded these growing leaders that “if anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (v. 35). Jesus modeled this for his disciples throughout his earthly ministry by feeding people, washing feet, and teaching all who would listen to see their lives in the light of God's kingdom.

Leadership, then, isn't about hierarchy, power, or status. It's ultimately about serving God and his people by using God-given gifts of leadership to bring the kind of focus and mission-mindedness needed to work together toward a Christ-honoring goal.

### **4 aspects of Christian leadership**

#### **Character**


Because Christian leadership is intrinsically connected to the heart of the leader, the leader's heart is the single most important part of Christian leadership. Christian leaders mobilize others not out of what they know but who they are in Christ. There's good news and bad news when it comes to developing a leader's character. We can grow character. In fact, the Bible describes character development as a key ingredient to Christian discipleship. But the bad news is that affliction is a core ingredient to God's training room for character. You can't learn character from a textbook. You have to learn it from hardship. Paul writes, “And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope” ([Romans 5:3–4 CSB](#) ). In fact, writing in the [International Standard Bible Encyclopedia](#), G. E. Montgomery describes character as the “successful endurance of testing.” What does Christian character look like? Paul gives us possibly the best description in [Galatians 5:22–23](#)  with these characteristics, typically referred to as the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” When these characteristics permeate a Christian leader's life, as they are tested, the leader has the moral force necessary to mobilize others to engage in God's mission.

#### **Conviction**

A leader's convictions are the truths they believe about God, themselves, and the surrounding world that lay a foundation for leadership. In his book [The Conviction to Lead](#), Albert Mohler writes: “The leadership that really matters is all about conviction. The leader is rightly concerned with everything from strategy and vision to team-building, motivation, and delegation, but at the center of the true leader's heart and mind, you will find convictions that drive and determine everything else.” Those convictions begin with the [classic Christian creeds of the church](#) and

their descriptions about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, sin, salvation, etc. What a leader believes about these biblical truths becomes foundational for how they act—and how they mobilize others to act. These convictions are vital because a leader will pass them on to others through discipleship. A leader who hasn't properly done the work on their own convictions can't faithfully teach them to others. A leader must have convictions about the major doctrines of the Bible, but they must also develop deep, actionable beliefs about ministry philosophies, ministry direction, and social action. A church's actions ought to be directed by a leader who is humble and confident about the direction God is moving them toward. This isn't only a theological necessity but a pragmatic requirement. Without deeply held convictions, leaders will always struggle to build teams and alignment. People respond to authentic leaders who lead out of deeply held beliefs. None of this means that a leader's convictions won't change. In fact, healthy leaders routinely revisit convictions to ensure they correspond to the teachings of the Bible and the leadership of the Holy Spirit. The ability to continue learning and growing is a hallmark of healthy, God-honoring leadership throughout Scripture and Church history.

## Calling

Of all the characteristics of godly leadership, calling is often the most difficult to clearly articulate. The concept has its root in both the Old and New Testaments. In [\*Eerdmans Bible Dictionary\*](#), A. C. Myers describes calling as: "A term designating God's summons to a specific task or role and his special relationship to his people." Although every believer has a general call to salvation, God calls each Christian to specific tasks in his kingdom work. God's call is a holy summons to participate in his mission in the world. Just as every part of the human body is necessary, the Church needs every Christian to know and live out their calling ([1 Cor 12:12–31](#) ). For some, that might be a call to pastoral ministry, but for others, it might be to serve as a Christian witness in the marketplace or in the classroom as a teacher. All are equally important to the mission of God. Understanding God's call—and when God is calling them in a new direction—is an important part of any leader's journey. Wrestling with the mystery of that call helps to prepare a leader for a lifetime of service. It's the first step of faith in a lifetime of equally difficult and often equally unclear steps.

## Competency


Leaders also have certain skills to develop. Every leadership role—whether it's in formal ministry or the marketplace—has various competencies attached to it. For example, pastors in most ministry contexts preach, counsel, shepherd, teach, lead teams, etc. Pastors will become more effective in discipling and leading others as they grow in each of these competencies. All Christian leaders have a different set of competencies that are important in their context. While counseling may be a significant part of some pastoral roles, it may be less important in other contexts. Leaders in a church's children's ministry may need to become effective in classroom management or volunteer development. A church's senior adult ministry leader may need to be strong in grief counseling. There is no set list of competencies for ministry. Most theological schools and training organizations have lists of competencies they hope to develop in leaders they serve. For example, Beeson Divinity School divides ministry competencies into five broad categories:

- Leadership
- Pastoral care

- Personal and spiritual issues
- Proclamation
- Relational skills

Acts 29 has 11 such categories for its church planters:

- Spiritual vitality
- Theological clarity
- Convictions and commendations
- Marriage
- Relationships
- Leadership
- Maturity
- Missional lifestyle
- Disciple-making
- Ability to teach
- Entrepreneurial aptitude

While it's important that leaders develop a variety of skills, the Bible ultimately declares that the Holy Spirit provides competency for Christian ministry. Competency can become a crutch that can separate a leader from the necessity of God's power. Paul writes, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" ([2 Cor 3:1–3](#) ).

### **Stages of Christian leadership**

Below we'll work our way through the four stages of Christian leadership: discernment, growth, maturity, and multiplication.

Don't think of the stages of leadership development as linear. While these stages tend to intersect with certain life stages, leaders experience aspects of these stages throughout their lives.

### **Discernment**

The discernment period is most prominent in the early years of ministry and during transitional periods. It's the time when leaders wrestle with God about their calling. Sometimes they try different roles as they sense a specific ministry fit. It's usually a time of great excitement and energy—of both highs and lows.

But leaders never reach a stage where they don't need to discern God's will in ministry. They will wrestle with God's direction their entire lives. Even if they've settled into a specific lay or professional ministry role, leaders will continue to search out new ministry contexts and new visions of future work. The process of ministry discernment is an ongoing part of life.

It's important during the discernment period for leaders to find godly counsel that will help them seek God's will and learn from others who have served in a similar role.

## **Growth**

Again, church leaders should never have a period in their ministry where they are not developing their character and skills. In the development period, leaders take stock of the training and experiences they need to fully embrace God's call on their lives.

In a sense, [leadership development](#) is simply another step in the discipleship process. For some leadership roles, this development occurs most effectively informally—through mentoring and lay training experiences. This informal process is often done within a church community, particularly when a leader is preparing for a lay ministry role.

A seminary or a Bible college can also be a part of the development pathway for Christian leaders. Most seminaries are designed to prepare leaders for professional ministry roles (such as pastors, missionaries, and church administrators) who need a more specialized training regiment. Some seminaries also offer training in Christian leadership or marketplace theology that's designed to equip men and women who don't work full-time in ministry. With the advent of the internet age, leaders have access to Christian higher education without leaving their current ministry contexts. Highly informative, actionable theological education, such as [Logos Mobile Education](#), is available anywhere on the planet and on nearly any topic.

This specific development stage, characterized by learning and growth, extends long after any period of formal or informal training. Leaders must often serve selflessly for years before reaching the next stage of development (maturity). These years are typically full of frequent rotating periods of failure, learning, and growth as leaders learn from their mistakes and build upon struggles to set the foundation for future ministry fruitfulness.

## **Maturity**

As leaders mature, their ministry grows in effectiveness. This tends to happen as ministry discernment, development, experience, and humility come together in specific contexts that fit leaders' unique backgrounds.

While leaders in this stage continue to discern God's call on their lives and develop their doctrinal convictions and ministry competencies, the maturity stage is marked by leaders' focus on the work of ministry. While fruitfulness will look different in every context, it's this period when you usually see it most clearly in the life of a leader.

One common characteristic of this period is that leaders increasingly have the opportunity to focus on areas of giftedness. Leaders who are particularly gifted in shepherding spend more of their time in this area. Leaders who are strong teachers spend more time teaching.

While the fruitfulness of this period relates to skill growth, it's the leader's increasing clarity of their calling that has the biggest impact upon ministry growth.

## **Multiplication**

Discipling other leaders is always a critical part of a leader's job—particularly a Christian leader's job. Even young and inexperienced leaders can step out of their comfort zone to disciple less experienced leaders.

Yet a leader who has experienced ministry maturation by discovering their unique fit and context has a special opportunity to pour into the lives of other leaders. As this happens, leaders multiply.

Mature leaders don't [multiply themselves](#) accidentally. It happens because they intentionally make mentoring a priority.

## **Keys to developing leaders**

### **Mentoring**

Leaders need mentors, and they need to be mentors. Both aspects of mentoring play a key part in leadership development. Leaders need to be led by people who are a bit further in their journey who can help them prioritize spiritual disciplines, serve their families, shepherd their churches, and engage their communities with the good news about Jesus. They also need to regularly practice the habit of discipling and training others. While academic training for some kinds of ministry can be critical, it can't replace life-on-life relationships.

"Mentoring is an essential part of leadership," Natasha Sistrunk Robinson said in an interview with *Christianity Today*. "In other words, you can't call yourself a leader if you're not raising up leaders."<sup>3</sup>

Mentoring is a type of leadership development with no cap on its potential. A leader doesn't need access to higher education or to be literate to connect with a mentor and, in turn, mentor someone else.

### **Ministry fit**

To develop Christian leaders, churches need a system for helping people discover the right ministry fit. Churches and Christian leaders do this in several ways.

**Trial-and-error:** Aspiring leaders can serve in capacities that seem to line up with their gifts, but they can do so without a long-term commitment. If the ministry doesn't fit, they can simply move on to one that does. This process can be effective for most roles. Even aspiring pastors can serve in short-term roles to get a firsthand idea whether that ministry role is a strong fit.

**Assessments:** Many churches use gift assessments—either self-assessments or ones administered by the church—to help in this process. Typically, these assessments include a series of multiple-choice questions around personality and interests. The tabulated scores provide aspiring leaders with a list of the top spiritual gifts the person demonstrates a proclivity toward.



**Interviews:** Some churches enlist interviewers to talk through a person's experiences, skills, and gifting and serve as a guide in discovering a ministry fit. These interviewers can be staff members or even the pastor in smaller ministry contexts. They can also be lay people. They simply need to understand how to ask a series of open-ended questions and have a broad understanding of how to connect people to ministry opportunities within the church.

### **Lifelong learning**

Leaders never reach a point where they don't need to learn. Because leaders often serve in the church for decades, it's critical they have an opportunity to sharpen their skills and apply those skills in ever-changing ministry contexts. For example, a volunteer who began leading youth in a local church in the early 1990s is now serving in a context that is vastly different three decades later.

Whether a person serves as a lead pastor, a children's ministry worker, or some other role in the church, constant access to learning will help to ensure a leader not only faithfully fulfills their calling today but can also effectively disciple others.

Churches can enlist everything from regular, on-the-job-training to [on-demand classes](#) and even in-person observation in other churches to help with this.

### **Biblical community**

Ministry is never a solo effort. It's always most effectively done in a community of leaders who are seeking after God's best together. Leaders need community to provide support through the inevitable ups and downs of leadership. They need prayer support, mentoring, and the opportunities to serve that come within biblical community.

### **The time for leadership is (always) now**

From the time of Jesus' first followers to the days following Pentecost to the Reformation and beyond, God has worked through people to fulfill his mission in the world. Leaders have been at the heart of that movement. As committed Christian leaders have mobilized the Church toward the Great Commission, God has worked through his people.

But today, as the Church faces a growing number of challenges, leaders are more important than ever. The Church's ability to develop and deploy leaders who create new leaders will be one of its great tests in the twenty-first century.

The world has leaders. Every segment of society has people that will fill a leadership vacuum if necessary.

But there's leadership—and there's Christian leadership. The Church's current moment desperately needs leaders committed to doing God's work in God's way with God's people.

“A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way.” —John Maxwell

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