

The Balanced Ministry of a Leader

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Strength in Weakness Series: Leadership Lessons from the Life of Paul
Colossians 1:21-29

I recently read a magazine article written for women which I typically don't do, that classified various kinds of emotionally immature men. Part of the reason I occasionally read things like that is I always wonder: Am I one of those guys? Anyway, ladies, you can "amen" if you've met or dated, or married one or more of these kinds of guys, so long as he's not sitting next to you. Let's play nice.

But this article classified various types of emotionally immature men. One type was the:

Mama's Boy

It said that for many men mom is still the most important relationship he'll ever have in life. The mama's boy compares all women to his momma, and he is looking for a woman who will treat him just like mama did, wildly celebrate even the most minor successes, wait on him hand and foot as he lies on the sofa when he has the sniffles, bring him chicken soup, mop his brow, get him ice cream..

And then there is the:

Lost Wanderer

This is the guy who just doesn't know what he wants to do in life. He is unhappy in his career; he is unhappy living where he does; he bounces from job to job. What he is looking for in a woman is someone who will be his starter button in the morning. Your job is to motivate him, to get him going because he can't turn his own engine on.

And then there is the:

Insecure Narcissist

This is the guy, who when you first meet him, comes off as supremely self-confident. He believes he is the best at his job. In fact, he believes that he is the best at everything. But he can't take a joke at his own expense. He overstates how successful he is. He is never happy when anyone does better than him. He is super competitive. Sometimes you think he believes he is God's gift to the world. You start connecting with this narcissist and you will find your life controlled. It is always his way or the highway. He is

looking for a woman who will never challenge him, never give him any grief, never even joke with him.

And finally, I will give you one more type from this article on emotionally immature men. There is the:

Commitment Phobic Man

This guy believes he is George Clooney. He just moves from woman to woman because he says he is happy being single. Actually, he is just terrified of getting close to anyone and allowing any woman to get to know the real him. What he is looking for is a woman, who will make no demands; who never wants a relationship to go beyond the casual dating stage, who herself is also commitment phobic.

Know any guys like the ones I'm describing?

Of course, immaturity isn't confined to one gender any more than it is confined to one race, one religious group, or one nationality. When you think about it, maturity can be measured in different ways. There is, of course, chronological maturity which simply measures how much time you've lived since you were born. How old are you? And there is physiological maturity. We're talking about what's happened to your body systems. When a doctor looks at you, how would your body compare to people your age? Do you seem younger than your chronological age? Older than your chronological age? Physiological maturity.

And then there is intellectual maturity. Do you have a trained mind, a coherent worldview? Have you grown in your thinking? And there is emotional maturity which I will define in just a moment.

But let me say that there is no necessary connection between these four types of maturity – chronological, physiological, intellectual and emotional. There are people who might be chronologically and physiologically mature, and intellectually immature. They haven't grown in their thinking at all. There are some, who by virtue of disease or disability, have physiological ages or intellectual ages that are very different than their chronological age. And of course there are some who are chronologically and physiologically and intellectually mature, but are emotionally really immature.

How would you define someone who is emotionally immature? I think of a few things. Someone who is emotionally immature has never learned how to control their emotions. They may throw temper tantrums when they don't get their way. They have a low frustration level. They are like 2-3 year olds. They are frustrated by the least little thing. They blow up. Their responses are totally out of proportion to any stimulus. They make mountains out of molehills. They can't take criticism. They're extremely jealous.

They are unpredictable. One measure of emotional immaturity is someone who has never learned emotional self-control.

Another measure of emotional immaturity is someone who has never become independent. At a certain point, we break free of our parents in a healthy way. We provide for ourselves. We form our own opinions. We don't just simply parrot our parents.

And when I think about an emotionally immature person, I think about someone who cannot delay gratification, again, like a 2-3 year old. There is no long-term thinking. The demand for immediate gratification leads to disaster financially, or disaster in relationships. They move from thing to thing, one person to another, one job to another. There is no long-term commitment. A person can't stick with something when it gets hard. They quit easily. They can't bear any weight. They're fragile.

Have you met anyone who you think is emotionally immature? They've not grown up even though they've gotten older?

All the types of maturity that I've mentioned – physiological, intellectual, emotional and chronological are absolutely necessary to live a healthy, thriving, fully alive life. But there is an aspect of maturity that is entirely neglected in most popular magazine articles and in most of the psychological literature. You won't find an article about this kind of maturity in most academic journals. I'm talking about spiritual maturity.

Spiritual Maturity

I want to talk about that today. I've been doing a series on the life of the Apostle Paul over the last couple of months. And because Paul was such a phenomenal leader, one of history's greatest leaders, we've been focusing on leadership lessons from Paul's life. I've called today's talk on spiritual maturity "The Balanced Ministry of a Leader." Let's pray.

Colossians 1:21–29 (NIV)

21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—23 if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

24 Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. 25 I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—26 the mystery that has been kept hidden

for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. 27 To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

28 He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. 29 To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

I want to begin by speaking about:

The balanced purposes of a leader

There is no doubt that the church has grown phenomenally in various parts of the world over the past half century or so. The statistics on the growth of the church in various areas is simply amazing. In China alone it is estimated that the church has grown at least 50-fold in the last 50 years. And it is growing not just among the old, but primarily among the young. The church is growing rapidly among the well-educated, and with big-city dwellers, people who form public opinion. Churches in Beijing and in Shanghai have worship services that are overflowing. The church is, likewise, rapidly growing in India, Brazil, Nigeria, and Indonesia.

And there is tremendous reason to rejoice in the growth of the church because the calling of every Christian, and certainly the calling of every Christian leader, is to see as many people as possible embrace Christ as Lord and Savior. We want the gospel to spread as widely as possible until it covers the earth. And we certainly want that here in Central Ohio. That every single person might be presented with the saving claims of Christ and embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. That ought to be the heart of every Christian leader.

But lest we be carried away by completely unvarnished enthusiastic response to the growth of the church in Asia, Africa, Indonesia and in South America, I want to share with you a word of caution from the late John Stott, who in my estimation was the greatest Bible teacher in the world over the past 60 years. Here is what John Stott said:

We should not indulge in triumphalism for we often see the growth of the church without depth. There is superficiality of disciples everywhere, and church leaders bemoan this situation...This situation is serious because it is displeasing to God. We dare to say this because the apostles whose letters we find in the New Testament rebuked their readers for their immaturity and urged them to grow up.

Consider, for example, Paul's critique of the Corinthian church.

1 Corinthians 3:1–3 (NIV)

3 Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. 2 I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. 3 You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?

Paul aimed wide. Look with me at Colossians 1:28:

Colossians 1:28 (NIV)

28 He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

The message of the Gospel goes as widely as possible. It goes to everyone. It has tremendous breadth. We see this particularly in v. 23:

Colossians 1:23 (NIV)

23 ...This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

But Paul is not content to just have everyone hear the message of Christ as Lord and Savior, or even to make an initial step of faith towards Christ. Paul insists that God's purpose through the gospel is not just to stamp people's ticket to heaven. The Gospel is not meant to be a fire insurance policy that we keep in the desk drawer and then go merrily on our way. The gospel is designed to be utterly transformative. Christian faith cuts deep. Look again at Colossians 1:28:

Colossians 1:28 (NIV)

28 He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

Christian leaders always need to be balanced in their ministries. It is always wide and deep.

We are called by Jesus to be fishers of men. Any of you love to fish? What is your purpose in fishing? I am not a fisherman, but I would imagine that your purpose in fishing is to catch as many fish as possible and you want them to be as big as possible. So here at Vineyard Columbus, we want to reach as many people as we possibly can in Central Ohio and around the world. I constantly pray for the numerical growth of the church. We want to reach as many people as possible, invite as many people as possible into a relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We want to plant as many churches as possible. And I also pray for a church that is not filled with shallow conversions and superficial commitments, a church that makes deep disciples. Wide and deep.

What else do we discover about the balanced ministry of a leader? We see in this text the wonderfully balanced service of a leader.

The balanced service of a leader

Paul says he is called to a 2-fold ministry; a 2-fold service. First, he is called to serve the gospel.

Colossians 1:23 (NIV)

23 ...This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

And second, he is called to serve the church.

Colossians 1:24–25 (NIV)

24 Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. 25 I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—

And Christian leaders always need to keep in mind this two-fold service. Mature Christian leaders serve the gospel, that is the truth and also serve people. Some Christian leaders are immature in their ministries because they focus exclusively on the truth and forget about people. I see this all the time with young, immature leaders – leaders who are strident, overly dogmatic, everything is of supreme importance to this person. There are no little doctrines and big doctrines – everything is a big deal. There are no primary things and secondary things. Everything is worth fighting over. They're harsh in their communication. They beat up the church that they're preaching to. They beat up their small group, the people they're coaching because they think that all they're serving is the truth. Their motto is "let the chips fall where they may; someone has to speak the truth."

Other Christian leaders are immature in their leadership because they focus exclusively on people and they forget about the truth. Everything is up for grabs. There are no sharp edges ever in their communication. Their motto in communication is to make sure you never hurt anyone's feelings. We have to soothe all ruffled feathers. We bend ourselves into pretzels, so long as everyone is always happy.

What's your tendency? What's your personality? Do you tend to fall on the truth side of the coin, or on the people side? What would your friends say about you?

We Christian leaders are always called to live in the tension of speaking the truth in love. Or to cite just a couple of scriptures, Christian leadership always lives in the tension of what the Apostle Jude says in Jude 3.

Jude 3 (NIV)

3 Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people.

And 1 Corinthians 9:19:

1 Corinthians 9:19 (NIV)

19 Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.

1 Corinthians 9:22–23 (NIV)

22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. 23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

Balanced ministry, balanced service always means maximum faithfulness to scripture and maximum flexibility to people. Balanced ministry is always about the radical inclusiveness of Jesus. Jesus welcomes everyone. No moral fitness is required. He welcomes everyone. But balanced ministry also includes the radical demands of Jesus, not just the welcome, but the demand. As we say in the Vineyard, “Come as you are, you’ll be loved; but, don’t stay as you are. Allow yourself to be changed as you follow Jesus.”

And if we want balanced ministry, leaders need to be clear about what to expect from Christian leadership.

The balanced expectations of the leader

Look at Colossians 1:3-5.

Colossians 1:3–5 (NIV)

3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people—5 the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel

There is great joy in leading God's people. What could be more fulfilling than seeing someone embrace Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and then partnering together with Christ and the church and seeing that person's life, their family, their future, transformed by Jesus – seeing people's lives filled with faith, hope and love? What could be more fulfilling than seeing someone walk out of an addiction, and walk in

freedom? What could be more fulfilling than watching a couple on the brink of divorce learn how to relate to one another in a loving and healthy way, and having their kids grow up in a home where mom and dad love each other and mom and dad love their children? What could be more fulfilling than seeing someone who is hopeless and despairing about the future catch a fresh vision for their lives, for their future, for their families because of Jesus? What could be more fulfilling than being a Christian leader in a church that is working for justice for everyone in our community – committed to biblical justice? Not just focusing on the haves, but on the have-nots?

So many folks in every church in America see the benefits of leading in the church and they say, “yes, sign me up! I want to experience some of those things. I feel called to pastor, to teach, to lead a group, to coach, to mentor, to be a marketplace leader, to let my light shine, to be a transformative influence out in the world. Sign me up for leadership.”

But the Apostle Paul says, if you want a mature view of Christian leadership, you need to have balanced expectations. It is not all joy. Christian leadership is not all a bed of roses, unless you expect with the roses some thorns and some bumble bees. Look at what Paul says in v. 24:

Colossians 1:24 (NIV)

24 Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.

What did Paul mean by the phrase, “I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions?” Many people have stumbled over these words. What did Paul think he could fill up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions? What is lacking in the suffering of Christ?

Let me tell you what Paul is not talking about. Paul is not saying that there is something lacking in the saving power of Christ’s suffering. Here is what he just got done saying in Colossians 1:19-20:

Colossians 1:19–20 (NIV)

19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Concerning salvation, Christ’s death on the cross is a finished work. When Jesus hung on a cross and was dying, scripture tells us that he bowed his head and said, “It is finished.” There is nothing that Paul or anyone else who has ever lived could add to the atoning suffering of Jesus. When Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead, he completely dealt with the human problem of sin.

So what does Paul mean by filling up in his flesh what is lacking in the suffering of Christ?

What he means is that there is necessary suffering as Christian leaders and Christian people go out into the world to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. As we communicate the message of what Christ has accomplished through his death and resurrection, as we communicate Christ as Lord of all, we face opposition that causes us to suffer. What is lacking is not the atoning significance of the death of Christ. What is lacking is the proclamation and application of his finished work of salvation around the world.

Simply put, if we want to sign up for Christian leadership, we will suffer. We will suffer, in part, because we Christians have a standard that is different than the people we work with. We hold to a standard that is different than the standard our friends hold. We Christians have a standard of life that is different often than our families. If you are a mature follower of Christ, you may find that you have a standard that's different than the people in the church. And when you hold a standard that is different, you're going to face opposition.

So many folks quit leading because they think that the experience of opposition means that something is desperately wrong. Things are not going as well as I expected. Mature Christian leaders have balanced expectations. They know that there is joy in seeing people's lives change. But in this broken, fallen world there are seasons when we see very little fruit. There are places where there is huge opposition to naming the name of Christ. We can go long stretches as a Christian leader and have very few people praise us, or encourage us. If we want to stay in Christian leadership for the long haul, we must expect both joy and suffering.

And if you want to fulfill the balanced purposes of Christian ministry, we need to understand what we're aiming at.

Colossians 1:28 (NIV)

28 He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

I see from this the balanced aims of a leader.

The balanced aims of a leader

Most of us understand what it means to go wide, to see as many people as possible receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. To go wide; to have people finally make a decision to personally surrender their lives to Christ. We understand what it means to go wide, to see person after person open up their hearts and invite Christ to live inside,

asking Christ to take up residence, to sit on the throne of our hearts, to call the shots, to be boss of our lives. But we don't often know what it means to go deep. What does Paul mean when he says here in v. 28:

Colossians 1:28 (NIV)

28 He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

What is Paul aiming at when he says one of my aims is spiritual maturity for all? My attitude is not "I'll save 'em, you raise 'em." Mature Christian leaders are not just spiritual sperm donors. I impregnate and I leave it up to someone else to parent this new Christian baby to maturity. As I said a few weeks ago, Paul's model of Christian leadership is that we are spiritual fathers and mothers. We stick around to raise the cubs. We don't just take off once the baby is born.

But what is spiritual maturity? How would you define what the Bible means by becoming spiritually mature? We know what emotional maturity is. We know what intellectual maturity is. We know what physiological maturity is. But what is spiritual maturity?

Here is how I think the Bible defines spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity very simply is:

Living a Christ-centered life.

Listen, becoming a Christian is not primarily a call to a new moral standard. Oh, your morals will change, if you become a Christian. But moral change is not the essence of Christian conversion, or the Christian life. You haven't gotten to the heart of what it means to be a Christian when you say, "Well, I am a Christian because I used to sleep with my boyfriend or girlfriend and I don't do that anymore." "I am a Christian because I used to lie when I was under pressure. I used to cheat on my taxes. I used to cut corners in business. I used to say anything to customers just to get the sale. I used to play fast and loose when I wrote my resume. I may have lied about certain facts, but I don't do that anymore." Yes, you should have a new moral standard if you are converted.

But Christian conversion and the Christian life is not primarily about getting a new moral standard.

And Christian conversion and Christian life is not primarily about being called to a new philosophy. Yes, if you are converted to Christ, you will adopt a new philosophy. Maybe your old philosophy of life was that life was totally random. Hey, stuff happens. But now that you've become a Christian, you see that there is a purpose, there is meaning, there is a God who is over all and through all and in all. When something unwanted

happens, you say God loves me and he will use this for my good and ultimately for the good of his kingdom, if I submit to him.

Christian conversion in the Christian life is not primarily about finding a new community. Yes, it is the case that if you become a Christian, you will find new friends. You will find a new community, new spiritual brothers and sisters. You might say, “My primary community used to be my drinking buddies, or my coworkers, or my softball team. But now I find my primary community is my Christian brothers and sisters.”

Still, Christian conversion and the Christian life are not primarily about adopting a new moral standard, or finding a new philosophy of life, or discovering a new community. What do we mean by Christian conversion?

Christian conversion is primarily and ultimately a call to a person. Jesus called people to himself – not just to new morals, not just to a new philosophy, not just to a new community. What is striking about Jesus’ call is that he called his disciples first to himself. He said, “Follow me.” The call of a Christian is a call to Christ, to follow Christ, to wholeheartedly obey Christ.

So what do we mean by spiritual maturity? For the Christian, spiritual maturity is all about the prepositions we attach to our relationship with Christ. Paul says in v. 28:

Colossians 1:28 (NIV)

28 He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

We are attached to Christ. We are joined to Christ. We are in Christ. We are with Christ. Paul talks about dying with Christ, being raised with Christ, ascending with Christ in chapters 2 and 3. A spiritually mature Christian spends time with Christ. We’re not just working out our morals. We’re not just working out a new philosophy, a new worldview. We’re not just hanging around with other Christians.

A spiritually mature person spends time with Christ. They develop their friendship with Christ. They want to get to know Christ. They want to know what Christ will be for them in good times and in bad. A spiritually mature Christian lives life under Christ. They submit their decisions to Christ. They want wisdom from Christ. They know they don’t see or know everything. They live life under Christ in submission to him.

A spiritually mature Christian lives life for Christ. The aim of a spiritually mature Christian is that Christ be honored. That at the end of the day, Christ gets the glory. Spiritual maturity is a Christ-centered life in Christ, with Christ, under Christ, for Christ. Ultimately, spiritually mature Christians want to look like Christ. I want to have the emotional responses of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I want to love the way Jesus loved. I want to pray the way Jesus prayed. I want to forgive and be as reconciling as

Jesus forgave and was reconciling. I want to be kind as my Savior is kind. I want to live the Christ-centered life.

Christian leaders have balanced ministries and they are the ones who produce spiritually mature Christians.

And finally, mature Christian leaders use balanced methods to bring about the Christ-centered life in those they are leading.

The balanced methods of a leader

Listen, there are lots of things a Christian must do for themselves to promote growth. At some point, a Christians needs to learn how to feed themselves. If you are a Christian, you need to go to God's Word and feed yourself on a daily basis. Christians need to find fellowship themselves. Christians need to give their lives away by serving someone other than themselves. Christians need to be generous in giving.

And there are things that God uses to bring about spiritual growth in our lives – unpleasant things like disappointment and pain, wonderful things like empowerment and answers to prayer.

But there are some things that a leader uniquely does that helps to mature other people spiritually.

Colossians 1:28 (NIV)

28 He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

Spiritual maturity is not the province of just a few special elite Christians. Spiritual maturity is the goal of everyone. Everyone, Paul said, is to become mature in Christ. How does that happen? Paul said he proclaims, he preaches, he communicates. And there is this balance in his communication. Again, let's look at v. 28:

Colossians 1:28 (NIV)

28 He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

He says he proclaims. That is made of two things – negatively, admonishing which is warning; and positively, he teaches. Helping someone go deep can't just be about enabling them all the time, or just supporting whatever they want. If you want to help someone go deep, there needs to be occasional challenges. Leaders admonish people. Mature leaders warn people. Listen, the choices you're making aren't consistent with God's will for your life. God has a better way for you. Long-term, this is not going to go

well for you. You cannot come up with a better purpose for your life than God's purpose. You will never discover, friend, a wiser way to live than the way of Christ.

Balanced methods include sometimes being negative with people. Sometimes saying things that a person may not want to hear.

And balanced ministry also includes something positive. It is teaching.

Colossians 1:25 (NIV)

25 I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—

Balanced ministry is not just warning. Some of you grew up in churches or in families where you were beaten over the head with the Bible, constantly threatened with threats of hell and judgment. Balanced ministry is positive. It is the whole counsel of God – stuff that's popular and stuff that's not popular, stuff the world likes and stuff the world hates. Every part of scripture, anything that's profitable.

Balanced ministry is wide ministry and deep ministry. Christian leaders should have as their aim to produce as many Christians as possible and to have those Christians not just grow old, but also grow up. Let's pray.

The Balanced Ministry of a Leader

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June 15, 2014

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Colossians 1:21-29

- I. The balanced purposes of a leader
- II. The balanced service of a leader
- III. The balanced expectations of a leader
- IV. The balanced aims of a leader
- V. The balanced methods of a leader