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Christian Ethical Expectations in Leadership

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Abstract

Purpose: Christianity and morality go together just as leadership and ethics do in many cultures and societies globally. This paper examines the moral expectations on leadership especially from biblical perspectives of the professing Christian.

Methodology: Using secondary data collections from literal sources like books, journals, and internet materials, the paper discussed the concepts of Christian ethics and leadership, as well as biblical foundations of ethics of leadership. It also examined the virtues that are expected of Christian leaders and enumerated acts necessary for maintaining Christian ethics by the leader.

Findings: Findings are that three dimensions of relationships for the leader include relationship with God, others and self. The virtues essential for the leadership in relation with God are demonstrations of having faith in God, fear of God and love for God. While virtues expectations on leadership in relationship with others include good character, integrity and justice, virtues in relationship with the self are self- sacrifice, self- discipline and self-control.

Unique Contributions to Theory, Policy and Practice: In maintaining leadership ethics, it is recommended that the Christian leader needs to exemplify Christian virtues, build Christian ethical culture, and seek to continually improve on leadership skill.

Keywords: *Christian, Ethical, Leadership, Expectation, Virtues.*

Introduction

The rate at which scandals are been reported in every sector of life; secular and sacred globally raises concerns on what is to become of societies around the world if the trend lingers further. In spite of the much teaching, guidance and expectation of different sectors of life, particularly religion, immoral acts and behaviors seem to be on the increase in virtually every society. Morality failures have also been identified with leaders in various sectors of life; political, economic/financial institutions, and religious. It can be more disheartening when such malpractices and immorality are traced to religious leaders including ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This paper examines the concepts of ethics and leadership, and discusses the biblical foundations of the interconnectedness of Christian ethics and leadership. It also identifies some virtues expected of Christian leaders and states some recommendations to maintaining Christian ethics expected in leadership.

Concepts of Christian Ethics and Leadership

Ethics is understood in simple terms as the process of determining what is right and wrong or what is good or bad. It is usually defined in relation to morals and doing of the right as opposed to the wrong and the good in contrast to the bad. Ethics and morality are sometimes used interchangeably; however, while morality refers to the content and practical doing of right and good, ethics concentrates on the process of deciding on the good and right or the bad and the wrong. Plato, the great philosopher opined that being moral was naturally valuable irrespective of the benefits or harm associated with it.¹ In his description of what ethics entails from normative sense, Opara Oguchialu asserts that ethics prescribes the rules and regulations regarding what the individual ought to do, and providing moral judgments of the rightness and wrongness of human action; norms and standards, of moral obligation, and moral values.² The standards of right and wrong guiding a people, organization, or society are what constitute the ethics of such group.

Leadership depicts activities of a person or group of people known as the leader(s) relating with people to impart others and produce some outcome either positively or negatively. It is defined as “the art or process of influencing people so that they will strive willingly towards the achievement of group goals.”³ Consequently, leadership is influence and it is relational. In a comprehensive definition of Winston and Patterson, the leader is “one or more people who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) who have diverse gifts, abilities, and skills and focuses the follower(s) to the organization’s mission and objectives causing the followers to willingly and enthusiastically expand spiritual, emotional, and physical energy in a coordinated effort to achieve organizational mission and objectives”⁴ bringing it to its being identified with character, behavior and conduct. According to Opara, “leadership and character exist in dyadic relationship in which one means nothing without the other.”⁵ This implies that leadership must be guided by human moral principles that will not only help the leader to focus on achieving the goal of the organization but also prevent the leader from actions considered as immoral in the relationship between the leader and the followers.

Christian Ethics has to do with one’s dealings with other people as adjudged by biblical principles of the rightness or wrongness of conducts displayed in relating with others. Similarly, leadership is perceived as good or bad; it is about whether the leader did the right or the wrong, it is about being corrupt or just. Leaders of high moral standards are those who influence others by moving them to “do the right thing in the right way and for the right reasons.”⁶ Terms or concepts that characterize ethics including integrity, justice, discipline, and accountability also depict the nature of leadership. Invariably, both ethics and leadership are characterized by human relationships and defined by character, behavior, habits and conducts in regards to collectively acceptable norms and customs. Consequently, Christian ethics entails not only identifying but also putting to practical applications those things acceptable as values and virtues according to biblical teachings to guide the individual Christian from those considered as vices and immoral. In every society or organization, morally defined actions are representations of values that are universally considered and acceptable as good. Hence, ethics

encourages the finding of character qualities which are admirable and worth cultivating in people considered as leaders.

In their integrative definition, Winston and Patterson assert that the leader is required to seek for the greater good of the followers for their personal development, emotional stability, and physical healing as they interact together only when the ethics of the leader is highly taken into consideration.⁷In the discharge of leadership duties, roles and obligations in issues of life, ethics requires that leadership authority and power must be administered with caution to ensure justice, fairness and equity. The desire to abuse power or misuse authority ascribed to leadership is sometimes strong according to the saying; “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The ethics of the leader is judged by the behavior, conduct and motives of what is done, therefore, the leader must be carefully guarded by ethics to avoid immoral behavior or conduct. Leaders are held in high accountability to be ethical and responsible to the followers and those from whom they had received the mandate of leadership.

From Christian perspectives, all Christians are called to lead at one point or another and in one way or another. Leaders are meant to serve others going by the servant-leadership style as modeled and prescribed by Jesus Christ. This means that leadership is service and therefore, it is ministry. A very admirable definition of Christian leadership is that of P. T. Chandapilla; he defines Christian leadership as “a vocation where there is a perfect blending of qualities that are both human and divine, or a harmonized working of God and man, given over to the ministry and blessing of other people.”⁸Therefore, Christian leaders are to recognize that God is the absolute and ultimate leader who designates people to leadership positions as callings and that leadership is time bound and restrained by space. Being moral is therefore of high significance to a leader whose life will honor God and leadership service fulfilling or successful. Thus leadership is complex and goes beyond titles or official positions such as Pastor, Apostle, General Overseer or Bishop. Christian leadership in particular must be distinctly recognized from the paradoxical characteristics of service. The moral standard of God is high and clear, therefore Christian leaders cannot take their ethics for granted.

Biblical Foundations of Leadership Ethics

The moral dimension of leadership cannot be overemphasized. Decision making is an indispensable art and act of leadership, an evaluation of which must comply with the expected standard or ethics of the people being led. Thus, leadership standards from Christian perspectives are those conducts divinely determined in the light of the word of God.

The Bible clearly indicates that Christians are to emulate the character traits of Jesus Christ and be guided by biblical principles depicting the attributes and nature of God. The foundations of Christian morality and ethics are those virtues seen in Christ and demanding emulation through obedience to His commands. For instance, in the *Decalogue*, distinct connection of who God is; character, attributes, and acts or what He does are directly attached to the commands. In the first Commandment, the command is “you shall have no other gods before me” (Ex.20:3, NIV). This is preceded by a description of who God is and His act; “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Ex.20:2, NIV).

God is just, would not tolerate the acts of injustices against His people in Egypt, He therefore brought deliverance to them in His mighty acts. In return, His people are to be just through their loyalty to Him.

Christian leadership requires extra human conduct characterized by biblical principles above moral qualities expected of people being led. The Old Testament portrays the Israelites as the nation to typify the moral and ethical standard of God in leadership to other nations. Aside from the people been required to live exemplary life, the leaders were to shun violence, injustices, sexual immoralities and perversions and they were to avoid oppression of the poor, weak and vulnerable such as widows, and orphans. According to Scott Rae, this limitation placed on leaders would cause them to always remember they were only servants of God and not gods themselves.⁹ Similarly, the New Testament shows us that Jesus Christ is by all standards the perfect model of morality in every aspect of life and leadership. It encourages Christians and particularly leaders to embrace virtues of humility, purity, diligence, prudence, and honesty, all found in Jesus Christ.

Effective leadership does not depend on academic qualifications or managerial skills as it is significantly dependent on the character and lifestyle of the leader.¹⁰ Nevertheless, there are human leaders who in spite of their humanness; weaknesses and limitations have proved to be exemplary in their conducts, characters and moral dispositions. Some of those who exemplified leadership ethics include Daniel, Joseph, Esther, Paul, and Peter and more. They serve as models we can emulate as believers in their ethics as leaders. We shall examine just a few of them.

Virtue Expectations as Marks of Christian Leadership

Every sector of life; political, economic, cultural, ecological, and religious recognizes and places higher demands on the character and conducts of leaders. Ethical virtues can be described as disposition of characters which are needed by humankind to have flourishing life and good relationship with others. Tim Cappell asserts that virtue is “a disposition of character which instantiates or promotes responsiveness to one or more basic good.”¹¹ Thus, virtue is associated with characters of doing well as opposed to vices or bad deeds. Acts of goodness universally are those deeds acceptable as right, appreciated and desirable. The acceptable order in virtually every society is to consider God first, others next, and self as the last in relationships. Consequently, ethics of Christian leadership can be characterized by a tri-hydric dimension of relationships in the order; God, others, and the self. The expectations for which a leader could be identified for ethics would be determined by good portraits of personal values, relational virtues with others and for God.

1. Relational Virtues with God

Leadership requires loving God whole heartedly; with heart, soul and strength. Since God is the Source from whom all leadership emanates, love for God is ethical for effective leadership. Right relationship with God are to be demonstrated in the following ways;

Faith in God: This can be described as human response to accepting the existence of God by His being, nature and attributes. In the opinion of Robert Merrihew Adams, faith is a requirement of being committed to freely giving the whole self to God because God is the Creator, Saviour, Lord, Comforter, Guide, and Sustainer of life.¹² Faith in God is a virtue because morality would be challenged without the advocacy of the Sovereignty of God. According to Tim Chappell, “it would be an immense disaster for humanity if [God] did not exist; for then the kinds of goods human seek would be irreconcilable.”¹³ Leaders need faith as a virtue to respond to basic practical issues and challenges of leadership to continually hope until attaining organizational goals and missions become realities.

The leader needs the help of God which comes by faith in handling matters whenever there is a challenge beyond the ability of the leader. There will be unhealthy situations in the organization or in the lives of the followers, the leader would be a good encouragement through regular prayers and assurance with the word of God that God will take care of the situation. Robert M. Adams opined that faith has much to do with confidence, or freedom from fear to work through the problem, conflict and crisis the leader may be going through and that prayer is the classic way to exercise faith in God.¹⁴ As a leader, demonstration of faith in God as the first and absolute Solution to problems, challenges and crises is a virtue required of the leader to encourage the follower to develop more respect for the leader and greater commitment to achieving organizational goals.

Fear of God: The fear of God is linked to virtue pointing it towards moral behavior applying to all humanity and implying retribution.¹⁵ Part of the reasons why moral standards of leaders keep deteriorating in many societies around the world can be traced to lack of the fear of God. The leader is to maintain a lifestyle or respectful relationship with God and people. A leader with the fear of God will avoid a lifestyle that is detestable to God such as covetousness, greed, and materialism. Leadership in the fear of God entails upholding justice, forgiveness and reconciliation as may be necessary. Lack of the fear of God may lead the leader to abuse of power, pride and gross immorality.

Love for God: The primary mark of a Christian is in genuine demonstration of deep love for God. This becomes evident in acknowledgement of God as the Creator of all things and therefore deserving adoration above all other being or thing. Sincere love for God would enable the leader to love the followers with the same love shown for God. Responsible leaders always exemplify ethical life that is consistently in love for God. Harry McClifty opined that love for God entails being concerned with the good of the other and to be infused with strength to live out the commandments of God in their entirety.¹⁶ The greatest of the commandment as explained by Jesus is to love God, and to love all people as self. It implies that if the leader loves God, leadership duties will be discharged in obedience to God loving others as the self. The grace to persuade, encourage, motivate and transform the people and the institution been led would be available.

2. Relational Virtues with Others

Leadership does not exist in isolation; neither can it be diffused from relationship. To be a leader is to be interactive, relational, collaborative and sociable. The moral expectation on leadership involves being inter-personally involved with others in acceptable manner as dictated by the norms of the organization. In virtually every culture, the Golden Rule is the basic standard for moral validation in inter-personal relationships. To do to others as one would have them do to one is a guiding principle to the leader in relating with others. This entails acts of good Character, Integrity, and Justice.

Good Character: A strong index of measuring the level of ethics of a leader is the character. Good character is the demonstration of qualities and virtues considered as good, virtuous, and of noble disposition. According to a research conducted by the Josephson Institute, six virtues are important in measuring the ethics of leadership; these are that the leader is found as trustworthy, respectful, responsible, fair, caring and patriotic.¹⁷ This implies that the leader must be reliable and dependable, one who could be taken for being committed to his/her words.

There are many factors that may inform character formation in persons before their attaining leadership positions. Parental background, environmental factors, levels of exposures and education are a few of what influence character development. However, studies have discovered that good character can be learned or grown through cultivation of desired values and virtues which become habitual behaviors when practiced over a period of time. While suggesting what leaders can do to becoming ethical and moral, Kamlesh Jain sees building of sound character as paramount.¹⁸ Christian leaders are expected to be of good character by being trustworthy, leading by example; letting their yes be yes, responsible in the discharge of their duties, highly respectful, and eliminating questionable practices through regular personal and self-examination of conducts.

Integrity: the life of a leader with ethical conducts is characterized by integrity; wholeness, sincerity, truthfulness, and blamelessness. Konzes, J. M. and Posner, B. assert that honesty, an index of integrity is the number one virtue of good leadership.¹⁹ Christian leaders must be reliable in their words; their yes does not become no abruptly and their conducts in the private matches their public life. Integrity requires honesty, transparency and accountability with finances. Such leaders of integrity are not scandalous and not easily roped into fraudulent dealings. With commendable loyalty to the institutional vision/mission, leaders of integrity demonstrate faithfulness and high commitments to the goal of the institutions they are called to lead.

According to Ciulla, “ethics and integrity is heart of the leadership and should be taken seriously for success of the short and long-term survival of the organization.”²⁰ Christian leaders must maintain their integrity on the issues of money. Financial misconduct and scandals are immoral and ought not to be mentioned in any organization where the leader is a Christian. Covetousness and greed are cursors to lack of financial integrity as contentment and godliness are great gains to financial integrity. Christian leaders must be integrity exemplified seeing

themselves as leaders under God and called to motivate others to promote a culture of integrity characterized by sincerity, honesty and blamelessness emanating from the life of the leader within their organization.

Justice: Justice is a hallmark of leadership directly linked to ethics as a virtue. It entails love in the public sphere denoted by having right relationship with all people within the organization. As a virtue, justice will enable the leader to provide the rights, authority, space, and skills to the followers to actively and equally participate in discharge of their duties for the good of all and for the glory of God.²¹ Leaders sometimes are caught up in the midst of abuse of power and authority for injustices. Christian leaders however must demonstrate fairness, equity, and objectivity in their dealings and relationships with all people. Therefore, for effectiveness, leadership must be void of biases and favoritism but to uphold fairness and respect. Justice upholds being loyal and committed to organizational goal in dealings with all people within and outside of the organization.

3. Relational Virtues with the Self

Christian leadership position requires the ability to relate with the self in appropriate manners. In other words, the levels of commitment given to self-sacrifice, self-discipline, and self-control are sacrificial and ethical qualities required of Christian leaders for readiness to go the extra mile at their own expense. Some of the qualities of leadership are:

Self-Sacrifice: is a virtue which enables the leader to identify with those being led. Kolawole identified a number of benefits to be derived from leadership self-sacrifice as promoting humility, enabling obedience to God, compounding positive impact to blessing others and bringing exultation of the leader.²² In paying the price of self-sacrifice, the leader should be willing to let go of personal ego, preferences, and desires and be ready to bear the pain, tears, wounds and scars of leadership. The marks of nails bore by Jesus on the Cross are the testimonies of the absolute sacrifice paid for our redemption. Leadership demands ethics of bearing the hard experience otherwise meant for all. There are testimonies of Christian leaders who would sacrifice the payment of their own salaries, entitlements, and benefits until those of the other staff are paid. It is immoral for a leader to seek for things of personal benefits at the expense of those of the followers. The leader must possess the virtue of ability to sacrifice comfort, convenience, and pleasure to serve rather than be served.

Self –Discipline: It is the ability to hold self to do the right thing at the right time even when it does not feel convenient to do so and to avoid excessive affections and inappropriate desire. It is a leadership tool for positive influence on others to fulfill the goal of their organization. It is defined as “self-mastery over one’s inner desires, thoughts, actions and words.”²³ Discipline and disciple are related concepts from the same root or guide word meaning subjecting self to do the required right when expected whether it was convenient to do so or not. This will help the leader to restrain from embarrassing actions and resist shameful desires. Described as a leadership value characterized as consistent, predictable and controlled behavior, leaders who lack self-discipline cannot courageously administer discipline on followers who err.

First as a disciple of Christ, the Christian leader must follow the leading of the Holy Spirit for others to follow. Diligence and hard-work are hallmarks of leadership which are developed through self-discipline. Lazy people cannot lead the people of God. Regular attendance and punctuality at programs and meetings would distinguish a leader from among others. Discipline demands making necessary sacrifices to avoid sleep, food, relaxation, and pleasure to build up the self to a level for effective service to God and His people. Christian leaders must be able to sacrifice their pleasure to study the word of God, pray, fast, and perform all spiritual exercises to lead effectively.

Self -Control: the leader would be provoked by the followers and people that are being led. Self-control is applicable in display of emotions; when the leader hurts, sorrows, or is stressed and in times of annoyance or anger. The ethics of leadership demands ability to control self in responding to emotional challenges in forms of damaging or destructive criticism, wrong accusations, gossips, and rumors. Rather than resorting in self-defense, rebuke, arguments, and unnecessary retort, it is important for the leader to watch the language used in response to provocations and hostile behaviors against the leader.

The virtue of self-control of the leader is essential over emotions such as anxiety, sorrow and guilt or passions shown in covetousness, jealousy, lust and gluttony.²⁴ Sexual purity of the leader is essential and must not be taken for granted. Christian leaders are to maintain sexual purity by being married to only one person of the opposite sex. Setting of a high standard of being faithful in marital relationship is none negotiable. Leaders with positive marks of ethics work on their areas of weaknesses with adequate thrust for appropriate responses to earn the respect of others. Tolerance, forbearance, and patience are necessary values to enhance the virtue of self-control of the leader. Experiences that may call for negative outbursts, responses and violence must be avoided by the leadership to avoid discouragements on the part of the followers. The ability to hold the self in human is essential sacrifice expected of leadership with high moral standard.

Maintaining Leadership Ethics

Leaders sometimes display tendencies of deviating from the right tract for which they were known from their emergence as leaders. There are situations whereby the leader started well by demonstrating commendable ethical standards but from which they ended up in a leadership mess entangled with various forms of vices and irregular behaviors. In order to continually earn the respect they deserve, leadership entails maintaining the required ethics and character without questions. The virtues of personal integrity, healthy relationship with others and absolute dependence on God for guidance would keep the leader in the right path away from unethical behaviors.

Exemplify Ethical Virtues: To make positive influence as a leader, leadership must be by example. The personal virtues of selfless services or sacrifice, self-control and discipline will guide into relating with everyone with respect, humility, and love. These virtues will enable the leader to see and treat others with respect everyone deserves. Being exemplary implies that leadership must be characterized by the practice of honesty, loyalty, commitment,

justice, humility, and discipline. These virtues when exemplified would enable the leader to be intolerant of indiscipline and violations of moral standards.

Ability to manage spiritual, emotional or psychological and physical stress or passion in form of anger, frustrations, envy, criticism, rumors, and lust appropriately is required of the leader. Servant leadership is the model Jesus Christ recommended and exemplified to all Christian leaders irrespective of where their leadership assignments are dispensed; secular or sacred. Punctuality at meetings, honesty, and transparency in financial dealings, being prayerful and sincere love for God are to be seen in the leader for others to follow.

Build and Maintain Ethical Culture: every institution or organization has its cultural values defined by its vision and mission. In the view of Schein, E. H., the culture of an organization involves the “beliefs, values, attitudes, ideologies, practices, customs, and language.”²⁵ The leader is to be responsible for putting together these elements until they build up to a desired culture aligned with the goal of the organization. Achieving a peculiar culture of ethics requires the leadership promoting; “teamwork, community, achievement, competence, knowledge, creativity, innovation, agility, having fun, leading by example, valuing diversity, encouraging others, and risk-taking.”²⁶ It is important for the leadership to ensure the nature of relationship that will sustain a culture of ethics is promoted.

Inter-personal relationships within the organization must be defined by right conducts of truthfulness, prompt resolution of conflicts, and right decision making. Key virtues the leader must take into cognizance in building and maintaining a culture of ethics include in the views of Kovanic and Johnson are that “fairness, honesty, integrity, respect for others, promise keeping, and prudence”²⁷ be evident in the life of the leader in relationships with God, others and the self. This way, enforcing required values for the targeted cultural standard through consistent and appropriate discipline would be appreciated by all.

Regular Improvement on Self: self-development and improvement is necessary at every point in life for everyone. While it is important for collective institutional development, the leadership is to ensure that individuals and unit groups within the system are getting developed regularly. In the church institutional settings, improvements are to take place in knowledge, communication, welfare system, and general inter-personal relationships within the church or its institution system. Leadership interest in improvement and development which includes the followers in the succession plans will earn them respect. Encouragement for further education, training, regular reviews on performance and compensations for deserving staff are ways to help the leader retain the ethics of the position.

Conclusion

As a quality of excellence meant to provide vision, influence, direction and guidance to all members or stakeholders of an institution for the achievement of collective goals, leadership would be void of its essence when it lacks ethics. As a power based relationship, it is more saddening when scandals and lack of integrity are traced to Christian leaders. The demand for godly leadership in every sector of life places a huge challenge to Christians since they have a

principal responsibility of being ethical in conduct having been called to model Christ in discharge of their roles as leaders. Beginning with sound faith in God, having reverence for God and undivided love for God, the leader must keep maintaining the upward dimension of relationship to ensure the horizontal relationship with other people remains intact. Effective and successful leadership in any organization including the church and her institutions require practicing ethical virtues at the three dimensions of relationships; with the self, the other, and with God.

The recommendations are that persons in leadership positions are to: 1) Daily and consistently walk with God through prayers and study of the word of God for wisdom and guidance in all decision making for the organization. 2) Build and maintain a Christian ethical culture of transparency and inclusion by exemplifying godliness and serving as model for all members of the organization to emulate. This requires being loving, caring, disciplined and upholding justice in all dealings with the followership. 3) Allow for periodic and honest evaluation through accountability partners, both private and public who will provide constructive criticism by calling the attention of leadership to areas for improvements and encouragement where necessary for progress of the organization.

¹In *The Republic*, Plato emphasizes the issue of justice, a principal element associated with virtue in Ethics as what people will naturally demand or expected to give in interrelationships.

²Oguchialu U. Opara, Ethics and Nigeria's National Development in the 21st Century: A Sociological Perspective" in *Journal of Social Science* 10 (3): 2013: 274.

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