

The Leader as Theologian

Kenneth O. Gangel, PhD
Experience: Scholar in Residence,
Toccoa Falls College



This is Ken Gangel. Welcome to the first lecture in the advanced course on Leadership and Administration for Christian Organizations. We want to begin as your outline indicates with the context of team leadership. There is a shortage of capable lay leadership and leadership teams throughout Evangelical Christianity today. This, coupled with the ignorance of the Bible and doctrine on the part of the great portion of the laity and lack of a genuine commitment to the Lord by many Christians, pinpoints, I think, (1) the failure of many churches to provide a superior quality, life-transforming experience and (2) to regenerate their own leadership patterns.

The great majority of Christians get their only contact with Christian living through the church. Such a responsibility necessitates a program of leadership development that's superior, not inferior, and progressive, not regressive, and flexible instead of rigid. So if we're going to have better church leadership, better leadership for Christian organizations across the board, a better informed laity, and a deeper dedication to Christ, a church needs to be based squarely on biblical concepts. This means having a biblical perspective on an understanding of itself, and that's mainly the focus of this first lecture.

Our understanding of Christian leadership must properly proceed from theology to philosophy to practical implementation. Much of the confusion we face today stems from the lack of a clear-cut philosophy, carrying with it the weight of specific objectives which have their truth and value foundations laid firmly in the Word of God. Christian leadership needs to be competent, and it's even more essential that it be thoroughly biblical. So that's our focus for the early lectures in this series.

Let's take a look at the secular analysis of the situation. In the 1950s, 1960s and on into the 1970s, looking back, there was abundant literature which provided a sociological analysis of the

church's problems from such noted educators as Gibson Winter and Martin Marty and R. J. Havighurst. The religious book market was flooded with volumes analyzing the churches as though they were a local supermarket or branch of a major industry. From that kind of examination, the church can well learn some of the organizational defects into which it has fallen throughout the years. We've had ample opportunity to study things like irrelevance, tradition-bound immobility, and the inability to meet the needs of modern society. There's been piles of stuff out on that. Some of the criticism was deserved and much of it was helpful. Nevertheless, one basic erroneous note flowed through most of the literature dissecting the church during those decades. It viewed the church largely as an organization— which it is—but it failed to take into consideration that it is also an organism.

In addition to secular analysis, there are also the distorted images of fiction, and a problem we face is the image that we've inherited in contemporary fiction and cinema. A picture of Jonathan Edwards thundering the truth of God to a people who trembled before His sovereignty has now given away to a leap of faith, a phony conman grasping for personal profit in religious merchandise. After identifying modern man as confused, complacent, chaotic, rebellious, and desperately in help of need, all of which is very amply available in the secular literature, after showing the problems writers of twentieth century fiction were totally unable to construct anything better than what they call themselves a picaresque saint, a fake saint. The voices of Kafka and Camus and Coppola and Lear and Allen have been heard more clearly on college campuses than the voice of God. Educated Americans have nearly lost sight of what the New Testament Church was all about, and we need to restore that if we're going to have any clear view of leadership.

There's also the gospel of a cause. This voice clamors to be heard in the darkness. Strangely enough, prophets of this position can be found in the ranks of variant theological extremes. Their paths differ. Their traveling gear seems diverse, but they end up at the same crossroads, the banner of some cause. Some tell us the church must become more involved in human rights, using the influence of pastor and parish to push for affirmative action, school integration, equal job opportunities, and dozens of other aspects of pressing and very real social problems. Others want to push us into the battle for world peace. Only in such a noble and worldwide cause for the benefit of the human race, they tell us, can the church redeem itself from its years of apathy and

injustice. Others argue that the church must be in the foreground fighting abortion and homosexuality in the public arena. But these are causes. They're good causes, and dozens more like them fail to distinguish between the supernatural work of regeneration and the accompanying results in individual behavior and society. Human rights on earth are not to be equated with heavenly citizenship. World peace, certainly a noble cause, forms a shoddy substitute for the eternal peace of God in the human heart. And American democracy dare not be equated with biblical Christianity somehow, although it so often is. So the problem of the gospel of a cause is that it has offered itself as a substitute for the gospel of the cross.

Third, there is a polarization of philosophy of ministry, and I'll come to this several times throughout this study. A number of beliefs and behaviors divide Evangelicals through the twentieth century and on into the twenty-first. There are levels and extent of separation, arguments over prophecy, disputes related to systems of biblical interpretation, and positions on the doctrine of inerrancy, and so it goes. Increasingly obvious as a divisive force is the attitude toward how the church should minister and what forms that ministry should take. Part of the issue, for example, is size. One wing of conservative Christianity focuses on what we have come to call the Mega Church. The Mega Church stresses the importance of small groups, discipleship training, and heavy emphasis on sharing. Obviously, these are not mutually exclusive.

It seems to me, also, to be obvious that the local churches represent almost every point on a continuum line between almost any set of views you can identify. People want to feel comfortable, and they do feel comfortable in varied ministry styles. In a future chapter, I'll deal with this, and in a future study we'll get into it. But that's enough for philosophy of ministry at this point.

Let's move on to a second major point or the meaning of the word *church*, and this may be very familiar material to you if you have a theological background and have studied Ecclesiology, particularly. The English word *church* is one of the most abused and misused words in the twentieth century vocabulary. Like Caesar, it suffers more at the hands of its friends than its enemies. Four common uses which many Christians make of the word *church* certainly contain no deliberate attempt to wrench the word from its proper biblical context. For example, people refer to the church as a building. People talk about the building. A man may say to his wife, "I'm going down to the church to find my hat that

I left there after the morning service,” fully knowing that no other person will be there at the time. He’s talking about the building.

Secondly, denomination. It’s quite common to speak of a collection of churches which have assembled themselves together in some kind of organization or association as the Baptist church or the Methodist church or the Presbyterian church. The third use is universal church. The universal church refers, of course, to all members of the body of Christ in all places and all ages. Some theologians have referred to this as the church invisible, but, of course, the church has never been invisible. The local church is the fourth, and the local church is any given geographical representation of the universal church. This uses of the word is most in focus throughout the pages of our study and throughout the tapes that you will be listening to.

Of the four common uses of the word *church* that I have just mentioned, only two are really biblical. The first two, building and denomination, have been grown up in the jargon of ecclesiastical years. It’s not a great error to use the word *church* in that way, as long as we don’t forget that in the emphasis of the New Testament, the church is always people.

The last two words, *universal* and *local*, are really the only scriptural usages of the concept of church. The Greek word, of course, is *ecclesia*. To the Greeks, the word indicated an assembly of free citizens, but to the Jews it would have had even in the first century more theocratic connotations. In the New Testament, the word takes three basic uses. First of all, a political assembly of free citizens. Now the word *ecclesia* appears in this context in Acts 19; in fact, three times in that chapter. The English word used in the Authorized translation is *assembly*, quite proper in describing the situation. God had worked various miracles through Paul at Ephesus, and Demetrius, representative of the silversmiths, feared their patron deity was in jeopardy because of the increasing number of people turning to the Gospel. So in the confusion that followed, mob violence was averted by the speech of the town clerk. When the mob reached complete chaos, as well as when it was formally dismissed by the town clerk, it is referred to in Scripture as an *ecclesia*, a political assembly of free citizens.

The second use is the Jewish assembly of the Old Testament. In the sermon just before his martyrdom, Stephen spoke of Moses and the church in the wilderness in Acts 7:38. There the word *ecclesia* obviously cannot be referenced to the New Testament Church,

and it certainly wasn't an assembly of free citizens in the Greek sense. It's a reference in a general way to the congregation or the gathering of Israelites in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses.

A third use is the Christian Church, and that's, of course, the way we use it, and almost all other New Testament passages deal with the Christian Church in either its universal or local form. Because of the extreme importance of this concept, we can't properly perceive of the doctrine of church without a thorough understanding of these two uses of the word *ecclesia*—the universal church and the local church. The universal church containing only true believers; the local church containing possibly confessing Christians who have no experience of regeneration. I want to go a little bit further with those concepts.

In the universal church, first of all, the Old Testament presented the church in typical form; writers of the Old Testament wrote of the church this way in typological form. Sample types include things like Ruth, the Gentile bride; Israel, God's remnant in the world. When you come to the Gospels, God's revelation of the church proceeds to prophetic form. Jesus Himself pronounces, "Upon this rock, I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). The book of Acts describes the history of the church in its early days and the spread of the gospel through the church beginning at Jerusalem and around the world. It's a literal fulfillment of Acts 1:8. It's not until we read the Epistles, however, that we confront any kind of formalized church doctrine, since God's sovereign plan largely confined such information to the writings of the Apostle Paul. The crown of church doctrine comes in the epistle to the church at Ephesus. Now not everybody would agree with that, of course, but it seems to be that the book of Ephesus is a high point of ecclesiology in the New Testament. And if that is the case, then the most glittering jewel in that crown is chapter four, a passage which comes into focus frequently in any study of Christian leadership. So we're not leaving our topic here.

The universal church includes all Christians (1 Corinthians 1), only Christians (Ephesians 5:23-27), and it's represented by those brought together through the Holy Spirit. Teaching on spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 offers clear evidence of the nature of the church as an organism. Universal church, in the language of the Apostle Paul, is the body of Christ.

In the local church, God's pattern has designed that the universal church manifest itself in local groups (Romans 16:16, Acts 2:41-47) that represent the local church at Jerusalem, carrying out the purposes and program of the universal church. No evidence in the Word of God suggests that Christ ever abandoned the program and format of the local church as the basic foundation for all forms of Christian mission in the world. What do we have in this business of local church? Well, there's membership of some kind. Membership in the local church seems to have been taken for granted by New Testament believers. They weren't nearly as hung up on it as we are where we have very, very clear-cut rolls and we send offering envelopes to certain groups of people and so on. But there are various passages which seem to indicate that specific rolls were kept. I don't think they are a very clear-cut teaching on the nature of those rolls, but there's a hint, at least, at membership. Let me mention those passages so you can track them down: Acts 1:15; Acts 2:41; Acts 6:2-5; 1 Corinthians 5:13; 1 Timothy 5:9. Passages like that.

We also see organization. Like the matter of membership, church organization is not specifically outlined in the New Testament. The Lord seems to assume it in Matthew 18 when He talks about establishing the facts of a dispute through collective hearing by the church. As apostolic authority passed off the scene, team leadership seems to take its place. In Acts 8, for example, Peter remonstrates with Simon, the sorcerer, on the basis of unilateral authority. But just a few years later, Paul writes to the church at Corinth that they have the collective responsibility to judge wicked persons in their midst. So you have a change over here from the one-person leadership style or a group or team leadership, as I like to call it.

Another characteristic of organization in the early church is that it arose largely in response to the needs and problems which the church encountered. The selection of deacons in Acts 6, if indeed they were deacons (we don't know that) provides a good example, at least, of responding to a need with some kind of organization. In a sense, the indigenous principle of missions is a more refined development of this earliest principle of organization.

The church also has some kind of government. An important part of organization in the church is its government. Although evangelicals differ regarding the significance of words like *episcopas*—which means bishop or overseer—and *presbyterous*, which means elder, several biblical principles of church

government are enunciated in the New Testament. We will explore these issues in future lectures. But for now, let's just say that church government should be biblical in constitution.

Young Timothy represents early church leadership, and to him the Apostle Paul writes that leaders should "constantly conform to sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrines conforming to godliness." That's from 1 Timothy 6:3. Of course, some would immediately point out that words—the word *words* here—refers to the words of the living Son of God, not to the words written in the Bible. Nevertheless, our understanding of the words of Christ exclusively depends upon God's inspired record of those words. We don't have any other record at all of the words of Jesus other than the Bible, so this strikes me as being a futile differentiation. One of the great errors, I think, of liberal theology down through the years has been to fabricate a separation of the written word from the incarnate word. Evangelicals usually are very careful not to do that.

I think, secondly, church government should be participatory in form. The existence of numerous evangelical denominations with varying attitudes regarding church government demonstrates that the Scriptures do not detail this issue. Some interpret New Testament teaching as congregational government, others favor Presbyterian form, and others a hierarchical Episcopalian structure. Obviously each group will defend its preference from Scripture and from history. So the only point I want to make here is the renewed emphasis on the church's people, whatever form it takes. Evidence throughout the book of Acts strongly suggests that whatever emphasis we may place on the role of elders, the New Testament will never let us forget the participatory role of people in team leadership in the church. That whole mission came about later a corruption of Medieval forms and we ended up with a hierarchical, bureaucratic church structure that we have today, but the New Testament knows nothing of this.

Third, our church government should be representative in function. How easy in Acts 6 for the apostles to select seven men who may desire to serve in the daily administration; that is, to do it themselves. But they don't. They carefully restrain themselves and ask the entire group to make the selection. That's a very important point. The statement in verse five is very clearly, "The whole multitude chose." Church government should be spiritual in nature. The Bible argues for participatory involvement, but mainly for spiritual involvement in church leadership and

administration. And I think perhaps the most obvious application of that is in the sending of the first missionaries. Acts 13 shows us that process. Selecting and sending depended solely upon the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit through prayer. The Holy Spirit selected the missionaries. The Holy Spirit sent them to a particular place, and the local church served as an intermediary agency, a physical representation, if you will, of the hand of God in His world.

What about the purpose of the church? Without a clear set of objectives, any organization suffers, and the church has been less than outstanding in its clarification of mission in the late twentieth century. Not all church leaders have been silent, however. At least one leading educator, Frank Gabelein, specified in print an attempt to answer the question, “What is the church for?” Let me just read you a couple of sentences from his work.

The answer is no mystery. Scripture makes it plain that the church is to be a worshipping body, committed to show forth the praises of Him who has called it out of darkness into His marvelous light. That it is to proclaim the saving gospel of Jesus Christ to the whole world, and that it is to obey all the teachings of Jesus Christ, its great head and Lord.

That’s a very important demonstration, a very important quote from Gabelein’s work *A Varied Harvest*, published by Eerdmans in 1967.

For thirty years, in fact, maybe longer than that—let’s call it 40 years— Gabelein gave us careful thought to the issues of Christian education and philosophy in leadership. Unfortunately, no one individual can speak for all local churches, so it’s important for you, me, other believers, and other Christian leaders to assess and reassess the purposes of our own ministries and to clarify relationships to the universal church. The New Testament seems to set forth four basic objectives for the church, and Gabelein picked most of these up in that brief quote that I read just a moment ago. Now, obviously, churches verbalize these differently, but they would look like this. The church structures a climate for worship. There are a host of passages which invite our attention on the subject of the church promoting worship. It may be beneficial, however, to confine our observation to the epistle of Ephesians.

In chapter one, Paul immediately declares that the purpose of God's predestination and adoption is that His people might be "to the praise of the glory of His grace." And lest his readers miss that emphasis, the apostle repeats the worship theme in verses twelve and fourteen. The great benediction of chapter three also focuses on the concept of worship. Paul writes "To Him be the glory in the church and to Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen" (Ephesians 3:21).

So to say that the church's purpose is to worship does not guarantee that the church fully accomplishes the objective. Providing opportunities for believers to pray, sing, hear Scripture, read publicly the Word of God, or to engage in any other kind of physical or verbal activity is just the beginning. As a matter of fact, worship is not primarily activity, but rather attitude—an attitude of heart and mind—which comprehends God and rejoices in the realization of who and what He is.

The church also provides a setting for fellowship. A little phrase in Ephesians 3:18 is sometimes overlooked, although there is a hymn made from it, "with all the saints." These words speak volumes regarding the nature of the church. Monasticism has never been God's way. Biblical separation today should be interpreted neither as some kind of isolation from others nor insulation from the very world that needs the witness of the church.

The Apostle John writes of fellowship in his first epistle. "What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also that you also may have fellowship with us and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). So in other words, horizontal fellowship among God's people depends upon vertical fellowship between individual Christians and their Lord. The world has to see; it must see Christians living together in harmonious love, demonstrative of the Christ whom we serve. John 13:35 could not be more clear about that.

I think another thing that the church does is to afford a strategy for evangelism. Biblically, evangelism is a clear proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ that leaves the results entirely up to the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. Evangelism is not getting people saved; it's proclaiming the gospel. Unfortunately, some churches have viewed evangelism as the only task of the church and have subordinated all other purposes to it. What happens, of course, is that churches like that fill their rolls with baby Christians who, instead of growing week by week on the milk and the bread and

the meat of the Word, receive only a constant barrage of the elementary principles of the gospel. That's why the writer of the book of Hebrews had to address this. Such excesses should not cloud the fact, however, that evangelism is a legitimate task of the church. Certainly there are some who have a special gift of evangelism, but their ministry does not excuse the responsibility of every Christian to communicate the gospel. Paul speaks for the church in Ephesians 3:8 when he says of himself, "This grace was given to me to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." In Acts 8:4, when the apostles remained at Jerusalem for some reason during a mass persecution, Luke records that the church "went about preaching the Word."

Now some would prefer to describe this concept of the church's purpose as *service*, and I don't have any problem with that. It's a good word. It's an inclusive word. God's people engage in various kinds of service through the church, and not all of them have to do with evangelism. So maybe we should say that the church both has a mission *in* the world and is a mission in the world.

Finally, the church maintains a ministry of education, or edification or discipleship. Sure the church has a responsibility for instruction. The Great Commission is a teaching commission. Check out Matthew 28 again and Acts 2:42. James Deforest Murch once warned us to "teach or perish," a very interesting title of one of his books. It seems inappropriate to move on to matters of leadership and administration before coming again to that golden deposit of truth in Ephesians 4:11-16, which speaks so clearly regarding the church's educational tasks. The NIV rendering of the passage sounds like this;

It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men and their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him who is the head, that is Christ. From Him, the whole body joined and held together by every supporting ligament grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work.

So in this passage, several facts or lessons form a biblical basis for the church's ministry and for our whole understanding of the context of what we are trying to do—the context of team leadership.

First of all, the church's ministry is carried on by those first gifted by the Holy Spirit to lead and then given to the church for that purpose (verse eleven in our passage). Secondly, a major purpose of the church's ministry is to help God's people mature so that they can minister. Maturation is education. It's a building up process (verse twelve). Third, the church's ministry, if properly carried out, results in a harmonious relationship among believers. The process of growing into maturity and harmony is one of becoming more like Jesus Christ. There are few things in the church more important than unity in the body. Fourth, the church's ministry is highly theological. It produces discerning students of truth who can, because of their knowledge of truth, detect and avoid error (verse fourteen). Fifth, a properly functioning church will effectively combine truth and love without sacrificing either one on the altar of the other. A mature Christian will be like his Lord; full of grace and truth.

So there you have it. If we look at the church and we see the church as a context for leadership, and every other Christian organization as a spinoff, we'll be talking throughout these lectures about parachurch organizations. I have in mind colleges and mission boards and publishing houses and youth organizations and campus ministries; all of this and much more. All of this spins off of the local congregation, the basic foundation for all ministry as a church. Hence, I start with that in any class or any lecture series on this topic. The overwhelming and all-encompassing objective of the church is total Christian maturity for all its members. Anything that leads to that maturity, and therefore to unity, is good. Anything that hinders or destroys maturity or unity is bad. And total Christian maturity must include, as we have seen, an individual and collective life of biblical worship, biblical fellowship, and biblical evangelism.

All of these are stimulated by and produced, actually, through properly functioning team leadership and instructional programs which make it possible for believers to do what they are supposed to do in the name of Jesus.

You may want to check further Robert Saucy's book, *The Church in God's Program*, Howard Snyder's, *The Community of the King*,

and Ray Stedman's little booklet, *Body Life*, which was revised and expanded and still, I think, available in print.

Our focus in the first lecture, then, is on the church—the church universal and local—and the unity of the body in preparation for ministry.