

## **Fighting the Need to Increase**

When John the Baptist saw Jesus walking in his presence, he made the declaration, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Most Christian leaders would say they wish that Jesus would increase and they would decrease. But it is hard to decrease in a leadership position. Natural trappings distinguish those in leadership, such as salary, title, prestige, priority, power, influence, honor and advancement. And in each area lie tempting opportunities for increase. There are also motivations to build a kingdom in which we house our growing collection of leadership trappings. Not only must we meet this desire for the fame and fortune of leadership with resistance, but, according to U.S. President John Adams, we must also have

“a habitual contempt of them.”[\[3\]](#) Nouwen is even more direct:

The way of the Christian leader is not the way of upward mobility in which our world has invested so much, but the way of downward mobility ending on the cross. . . . Here we touch the most important quality of Christian leadership in the future. It is not a leadership of power and control, but a leadership of powerlessness and humility in which the suffering servant of God, Jesus Christ, is made manifest.[\[4\]](#)

Perhaps the hardest place to decrease is in the influence and the power we hold over people and decisions. For this reason we find Christian leaders who are overly directive at best and autocratic at worst. As a result we produce churches and ministries that are rife with learned helplessness. By overestimating our worth we help our people depend on us for everything. And that dependence

feeds into our need to be needed, to be the visionary, to be in control. We tell ourselves that the more we lead in this way, the more our leadership is valued and our presence desired.

Of course, this is not real leadership but a counterfeit that contributes to *our* increase and expands *our* kingdom. This type of leader is an owner-leader. This leadership does a terrible disservice to people, leaving them uninvolved and underdeveloped. It wastes resources and limits ministry, all under the guise of strong leadership and the use of God-given talents for “getting things done.” Leadership pioneer Robert Greenleaf reminds us that the difference between a true servant-leader who is servant first and a leader-servant who seeks leadership first lies in the growth of the people who serve under him or her. The test question is, “Do those served grow as persons; do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?”[\[5\]](#)



Steward leaders are stewards over the people they serve. They cultivate people. Leadership bent on self-centered increase lacks integrity and is usually dishonest. Integrity bears witness externally to all that we are internally. It does not derive from or depend on what is external, on an external increase. For that reason, godly integrity begins with our inner life in God.

Stephen Covey sees integrity as “the value we place on ourselves.”<sup>[6]</sup> He means that we first must keep faith with ourselves if we are to be trusted and trustworthy to those around us. We must keep the promises we make to our own value system. We will see that for steward leaders self-confidence must be founded on faith in Christ and a desire to be like him—in fact to be indwelt by him—in every way. We must seek to be Christlike in our inner being and be confident that “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion” (Philippians 1:6). If Christ is truly living in us, as Paul

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but desire that Jesus' face be seen in all they do. Leadership expert Max De Pree's definition is worth repeating: "The first responsibility of the leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the leader is a servant."[\[7\]](#)

I have come to understand that the call of the steward leader is a call to a lifestyle of an *ever-decreasing* thirst for authority, power and influence, where our quest for reputation is replaced by confidence in the power of God's anointing.