

Deconstructing ‘Transformational’ in Christian Transformational Leadership

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Abstract

Christian Transformational Leadership is a major Christian leadership theory. This article, on the basis of a definition of Christian transformational leadership, applies a semantic (or deconstructionist) critique to three core features of the theory, namely influence, persuasiveness, and the ability to strategize. It does so by seeking to identify conflict or difference which attaches to these terms in twenty-two Christian transformational leadership texts. It reveals that the theory may make extraordinary demands on the leader, and exact a heavy emotional toll.

1. Introduction

Christian transformational leadership is a major Christian leadership theory, whereby the Christian leader, most simply, seeks to influence (or transform) followers to achieve shared goals. In an earlier article, the following concise definition of Christian transformational leadership was proposed:

Christian Transformational Leadership is leadership which specifically declares a Biblical or Christian foundation, or is

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

specifically directed to the Church. It holds that a leader will be influential (or transformational) to achieve shared goals, through his or her vision, character, persuasiveness, and ability to strategize (Scarborough 2011:15).²

In addition, I referred *inter alia* to the possibility of a semantic critique of Christian transformational leadership, on the basis of such a definition. With this in mind, this study seeks to apply a semantic (specifically, a deconstructionist) critique to Christian transformational leadership.

Three features of Christian transformational leadership seem to present a particularly fruitful opportunity for such critique. These appear in the above definition as (a) influence, (b) persuasiveness, and (c) the ability to strategize. According to Christian transformational leadership theory, a leader brings his or her influence to bear on a situation, *inter alia* through persuasiveness and the ability to strategize. In other words, the ability to influence others is contingent on the three abovementioned characteristics in the leader.

Two qualifications are necessary. Firstly, the purpose of this article is a modest one, namely, to observe and record several difficulties attributed to the notion of influence and general aspects of influence in Christian transformational leadership. It is not the purpose of this article to provide biblical or theological insights into the problems which it reveals. Secondly, since the focus is on features of the theory which are closely related, it is beyond the scope of this article to propose rigorous categorizations of these features. Rather, the categorizations are somewhat general, and will assist in presenting a weight of evidence.

² The term 'transformational' is merely used for context here. The term 'influence' is preferred, because it is far more common in the literature.

The details of the method of critique are not of great importance here. Most simply, this article seeks to identify signs in the texts that the core features, namely, influence, persuasiveness, and the ability to strategize, may be self-defeating or counter-productive. In terms of a deconstructionist critique, it is important to identify signs which indicate that the text is 'at variance with itself' (Poole 1999:203) or 'works against itself' (Mautner 2000:122). This is referred to as *conflict* or *difference* in a text.³

A survey critiquing the three features of Christian transformational leadership initiates this study.

2. The Importance of Influence

The definition of Christian transformational leadership states that the Christian leader will be influential. In keeping with this, the concept of 'influence' is of core importance to the theory.

Maxwell (1998:17) states it confidently: Leadership is influence—nothing more, nothing less.' In terms of the theory, if one's intended influence should fail to bring about change, the Christian transformational leader cannot lead. Engstrom (1976:127) states simply that 'since the function of leadership is to lead, getting people to follow is of primary importance'. Stanley (2006:34) also reflects, 'Accepting the status quo is the equivalent of accepting a death sentence'.

³ As before (Scarborough 2011:5), the bases of the critique are the following works on Christian transformational leadership: Banks and Ledbetter (2004); Barna (1997); Blackaby and Blackaby (2001); Clinton (1988); Engstrom (1976); Everist and Nesson (2008); Ford (1993); Gibbs (2005); Guder (1998); Halcomb, Hamilton and Malmstadt (2000); Hunter (2004); Hybels (2002); Jinkins (2002); Maxwell (1998); Munroe (2005); Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006); Sanders (1994); Stanley (2006); Thomas (1999); Thrall, McNicol and McElrath (1999); Wofford (1999); and Wright (2000).

In general, authors writing on Christian transformational leadership acknowledge influence to be of central importance (Barna 1997:24; Clinton 1988:101; Engstrom 1976:24; Gibbs 2005:22; Hunter 2004:68; Hybels 2002:127; Munroe 2005:52; Sanders 1994:27; Stanley 2006:139; Thomas 1999:31; Wright 2000:31). Some, however, employ synonyms for influence, such as moving people (Blackaby and Blackaby 2001:20), forming people (Everist and Nesson 2008:1; Guder 1998:183), or having 'an effect on outcomes' (Thrall, McNicol, and McElrath 1999:10).

2.1. Persuasiveness

Christian transformational leadership routinely highlights that, in order for influence to work, a leader needs to have character trait of persuasiveness. This differs from influence, in that it emphasizes the *capacity* of the leader to influence others (Gibbs 2005:21; Munroe 2005:76; Sanders 1994:27), while influence has a greater emphasis on the method of leadership, as contrasted, for example, with mere transaction or coercion. Such persuasiveness usually has four aspects.⁴ However, these are not of crucial importance here.

Persuasiveness refers to 'the capacity to guide others to places they ... have never been before' (Gibbs 2005:21), the skill of being able to motivate followers (Thomas 1999:146), or 'the power to persuade' (Engstrom 1976:64). Sometimes, it is referred to as *charisma* (Everist and Nesson 2008:56; Gibbs 2005:39; Wofford 1999:27). However, this

⁴ In the secular transformational leadership literature, these aspects are 'idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration' (Sosik 2006:18; Yukl 1999:2). They may be referred to together as 'charisma' (Bass and Riggio 2006:25).

need not connote personal magnetism and charm, and therefore, the term 'persuasiveness' is seen to be more appropriate.

Generally, Christian transformational leadership experts, in one way or another, advances persuasiveness as a necessary trait of the Christian transformational leader (Barna 1997:23; Banks and Ledbetter 2004:40; Blackaby and Blackaby 2001:17; Clinton 1988:14; Engstrom 1976:64; Ford 1993:25; Halcomb, Hamilton and Malmstadt 2000:51; Hunter 2004:185; Maxwell 1998:162; Sanders 1994:73; Stanley 2006:118; Wright 2000:18).

2.2. Strategy

Influence further needs the support of sound strategy. Such strategy explores the best possible ways to implement a particular course of action.

Maxwell (1998:203) considers that a leader needs the right action, at the right time, to guarantee success. Banks and Ledbetter (2004:133) state that leadership requires 'a strategic plan [which] is a long-term commitment to something we intend to do'. And Stanley (2003:79) states that every good coach (that is, leader) goes into the game with a strategy.

All of the Christian transformational leadership authors in this study emphasize the necessity for strategy (Barna 1997:25; Blackaby and Blackaby 2001:70; Clinton 1988:88; Everist and Nesson 2008:101; Ford 1993:Cover; Gibbs 2005:99; Guder 1998:201; Halcomb, Hamilton and Malmstadt 2000:130; Hybels 2002:55; Munroe 2005:243; Sanders 1994:113; Thomas 1999:31; Thrall, McNicol and McElrath 1999:181; Wofford 1999:89; Wright 2000:71).

This, then, describes three core characteristics of Christian transformational leadership; or rather, it describes three core characteristics as *presented* by its proponents. It is on this basis that one may now explore whether or not the text is at variance with itself, or working against itself.

3. The Burden of Influence

It is here that the semantic (or deconstructionist) critique begins. Attention therefore shifts to the key term, 'influence', which appears in the Christian transformational leadership definition.

In terms of a deconstructionist critique, one seeks to identify conflict or difference in a text. A methodical way of pursuing this, is to identify recognised oppositions of a key word in a definition (an 'opposition' has a similar meaning to an 'opposite').⁵ For example, one would take a key term in a definition, identify its opposition, or oppositions, then seek to establish whether these are reflected in the text.

A contrasting phrase to the word influence is absence of change (Lloyd 1988). Thus, where it is intended that a leader should influence others, the requisite change may not happen. Another opposition of influence is weakness (Longman Mobile Dictionary 2007). That is, where a leader seeks to prevail over others, he or she may be defeated through inability in whatever shape or form. If such oppositions are found in the text, then the text might work against itself, so invalidating much of what it represents on the surface.

⁵ The meaning of an 'opposition' is, however, broader than an 'opposite'. Some important types of opposition are antonyms, directional opposites, and heteronyms (Jöbner 2002:87).

3.1. Deconstructing influence

This sub-section seeks to search for signs that an absence of change may present a challenge to the Christian transformational leader.

London (1997:118) notes that 'congregations are determined to resist change', and that 'it is the congregation's job not to want to change'. Everist and Nesson (2008:173) observe that numerous *ghosts* in the church contribute to homeostasis. Wofford (1999:82) notes that the 'choice to change ... is not always an option', and that 'among the greatest threats to the church' is those persons who 'hold tenaciously to old ways' (Wofford 1999:143). Roxburgh and Romanuk (1006:81) state that 'the history of ... change is cluttered with an endless series of plans, programs, and visions that died in birth.' Stanley (2003:34) considers that 'any system will unconsciously conspire to ... prevent change'. Wofford (1999:143) adds that 'Christian organizations may be more inclined to resist change than secular ones', and that 'lack of change' may be a common cause of ministers moving on (Wofford 1999:90).

There is also indirect evidence that Christian transformational leaders may need to contend with an absence of change. This is seen particularly in admonitions to persevere with change. The leader will pursue a vision 'no matter what' (Hybels 2002:40). Nothing should interrupt the direction of ministry (Phillips 1997:221), and the leader will refuse to admit defeat (Engstrom 1976:85; Maxwell 1998:153; Munroe 2005:263; Phillips 1997:231). The test of spiritual leadership is the achievement of its objective (Sanders 1994:166).

The next step is to search for indicators that Christian leaders may, through weakness, find themselves unable to bring their influence to bear on a situation.

Christian leaders, where they intend to influence a local community of faith, 'too often ... underestimate the power of homeostasis' (Everist and Nesson 2008:172). 'All over North America', Christian leaders are frustrated over their inability to 'get things moving' (Engstrom 1976:14). And through their inability to 'induce people to do happily some legitimate thing', they become 'unfit for leadership' (Engstrom 1976:92).

Again, there is indirect evidence that leaders are susceptible to weakness. This is seen particularly in demands for extraordinary strength. The Christian transformational leader is required to demonstrate patience, fortitude, and long-term stamina in the face of followers' resistance (Gibbs 2005:155). He or she should possess 'a great deal of courage' (Roxburgh and Romanuk 2006:137). The leader will 'determinedly hold on to the vision' (Halcomb, Hamilton and Malmstadt 2000:185). Christian transformational leaders may need to use 'forceful ... power to endure stress or pain' (Halcomb, Hamilton and Malmstadt 2000:46). And followers must 'not be allowed' to hinder a leader's visions and purposes (Wofford 1999:155). Sanders (1994:53) suggests the following prayer: 'God harden me against myself'.

Not only do absence of change and weakness represent external hazards for the leader. It is to be expected that such tensions would elicit an inner emotional response. This will be the focus of the next segment.

3.2. The emotional cost of influence

The texts have revealed that the influence, which is central to Christian transformational leadership, may not always be workable. Progress may be impossible, and there are those who may lack the stamina to persist. This raises the following question: how should Christian

transformational leaders respond to such constraints emotionally? In this regard, the literature reveals considerable distress.

Wofford (1999:85-86) considers that the greatest trial for the Christian leader lies in driving values and visions against the *status quo*. Thomas notes that for many Christian leaders, 'their area of greatest frustration' is 'getting people to do what you want them to do' (Thomas 1999:43). Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:81) likewise explain that there is 'a history of deep pain' in the lives of those who have sought to bring about change, and if anything defeats the leader, it is transition issues. Murren (1997:205) observes that instituting change is 'a draining process, even under the best of circumstances'. Finally, Everist and Nesson (2008:165) notice that many pastors are 'very frustrated by their inability to motivate members'.

Related to this, casting vision is a daunting challenge, and opposition is hard to deal with (Hybels 2002:41). Selling the vision is an onerous task (Blackaby and Blackaby 2001:65), and putting it into practice is punishing (Gangel 1997:54). Various Christian transformational leadership authors similarly reveal emotional strain over resistance to change or innovation (Blackaby and Blackaby 2001:194; Clinton 1997:169; Ford 1991:91; Gibbs 2005:163; Halcomb, Hamilton and Malmstadt 2000:181; London 1997:115, 184; Roxburgh and Romanuk 2006:16,104; Stanley 2006:34).

All in all, while it is to be expected that the requirement to influence others may not be easy, the texts reveal a counter-dynamic, which may at times seem to be total, and would appear to reveal abnormal strain in the context of Christian transformational leadership.

4. The Burden of Persuasiveness

Continuing with the semantic (or deconstructionist) critique, it is important to focus on the key concept of *persuasiveness*, which appears in the Christian transformational leadership definition.

An antonym of the term persuasiveness is *resistance* (Lloyd 1988). That is, where it is intended that a leader should be persuasive, one may find instead signs of resistance from so-called followers. Another is *dissuasion* (Lloyd 1988; Merriam-Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus 2007). If the leader is dissuaded from his or her intended course, then persuasiveness is defeated. If such oppositions are found in the text, then the text might be at variance with itself, so invalidating much of what it represents on the surface.

4.1. Deconstructing persuasiveness

This sub-segment commences with a search for signs that resistance may present a challenge to the Christian transformational leader.

London (1997:116) observes that followers may resist 'with almost supernatural power the very notion of changing the way things used to be'. Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:81) observe that valiant attempts to bring about change are resisted and cut down. Gibbs (2005:169) notes that Christian leadership may involve 'spiritual opposition, sometimes on a daily basis', and Wofford (1999:81) observes: 'As old ways of doing things are laid aside, conflicts often occur' (Wofford 1999:81). Jinkins (2002:45) states that 'sabotage is part of the process of change, while Hunter (2004:75) states that about 10 per cent of followers predictably seek to sabotage a leader. Munroe (2005:209) notes that the leader may face incredible odds, while Blackaby and Blackaby (2001:5) state that the leader is under enormous pressure. Clinton (1988:106)

considers: 'When people influence other people, conflict often arises.' In keeping with this, several leadership authors consider conflict to be the norm (Barna 1997:239; Ford 1991:252; Hunter 2004:208; Jinkins 2002:22; London 1997:119; Roxburgh and Romanuk 2006:12; Van Yperen 1997:241).

There is also indirect evidence that Christian transformational leaders may need to contend with resistance. This is seen particularly where authors state the need for great effort to make one's influence felt. Christian transformational leadership requires 'enormous efforts' Hunter (2004:157). In fact, it requires a herculean effort (Blackaby and Blackaby 2001:7). The Church 'often requires strength of leadership that is uncommon in the secular world' (London 1997:118). The Christian transformational leader may need to be 'as fierce as a pit bull' to preserve the mission (Hunter 2004:95), and 'must relentlessly develop a bulldog's mentality' (Halcomb, Hamilton and Malmstadt 2000:185). 'When leaders know they are doing exactly what God is asking, no amount of animosity will move them to do anything else' (Blackaby and Blackaby 2001:250). In the face of resistance, he or she will face and seize! (Ford 1991:261).

Next, focus must shift to searching for signs that Christian leaders, rather than persuading others, may be *dissuaded* from their intended course.

Thrall, McNicol, and McElrath (1999:3, 13, 109) note that frustration, anxiety, and despair are common, and fear tugs at the heart. Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:18) observe that many church leaders function 'out of low expectation and hope'. Blackaby and Blackaby (2001:3) note that there are countless discouraged leaders who would probably quit today. Clinton (1988:109) notes that 'leadership backlash [a strong backward reaction] tests a leader's perseverance'. Engstrom (1976:100)

states that deep depression is not uncommon. Several Christian transformational leadership authors describe the loneliness of leadership (Engstrom 1976:85; Gangel 1997:53; Gibbs 2005:165; Sanders 1994:118), while Blackaby and Blackaby (2001:31,171) record that many have a sense of desperation.

There is indirect evidence that leaders are susceptible to dissuasion. This is seen particularly in continual admonitions to endure. 'The ability to endure is crucial' (Gangel 1997:43), and the Christian leader requires 'a ribbon of steel' running through him or her (Jenkins 2002:30). Christian transformational leadership demands superior spiritual power (Sanders 1994:28), and 'courage of the highest order' (59). Similarly, several Christian transformational leadership authors suggest the need for high motivation or endurance (Engstrom 1976:98; Gibbs 2005:173; Guder 1998:183; Sanders 1994:19; Thrall, McNicol and McElrath 1999:115).

Again, not only do resistance and dissuasion represent *external* hazards for the leader. It is to be expected that the considerable pressures described would elicit an inner, *emotional* response.

4.2. The emotional cost of persuasiveness

The texts have revealed that the persuasiveness, which is central to Christian transformational leadership, may place heavy demands on the leader. Followers may resist with almost supernatural power, and leaders may find themselves under enormous pressure. This raises the question as to how Christian transformational leaders respond *emotionally* to such pressures. In this regard, the literature reveals considerable strain.

Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:81) note that resistance to change causes hurt and struggle. Ford (1991:264) observes that such resistance is painful, shameful, and even fatal. Jinkins (2002:44) states that there is the desire to flee resistance and sabotage, and the leader faces grief and abandonment (Jinkins 2002:45). Hybels (2002:231) writes: 'The single most pressing issue [is] enduring'. Engstrom (1976:83) similarly considers that there is 'the need for endurance ', and he pleads: 'It's too soon to quit!' (206). Thomas (1999:135) responds to the challenges with the mantra: "Lord have mercy", while Jinkins (2002:32), quoting Eugene Peterson, calls for ministers to be lashed to the ministry mast. Ford (1991:252), in the context of resistance to Christian transformational leadership, refers to several leaders who preferred to die. Lastly, Engstrom (1976:14) notes that Christian transformational leadership involves heavy struggles, and always exacts a toll (Engstrom 1976:95).

Altogether, while it is to be expected that *persuasiveness* will require perseverance and stamina, the texts reveal the need for a level of motivation which is extremely high, and would again appear to reveal an *abnormal* burden in the context of Christian transformational leadership.

5. The Burden of Strategy

Continuing with the semantic (or deconstructionist) critique, attention must shift to the key concept, namely, ability to strategize, which appears in the Christian transformational leadership definition.

A key antonym of the term strategy is *unpreparedness* (Lloyd 1988). That is, the unpreparedness of the leader may, through his or her errors or inadequate preparation, undermine a strategic plan. Another is *cessation* (Lloyd 1988). That is, where it is intended that a leader should

gain a strategic advantage, one may find instead cessation of the plan. Again, if such oppositions are found in the text, then the text might work against itself, so invalidating much of what it represents on the surface.

5.1. Deconstructing strategy

This section commences with the search for signs indicating that unpreparedness may present a challenge to the Christian transformational leader.

Maxwell (1998:196) states simply: 'The wrong action at the wrong time leads to disaster', and that anything less than the right action at the right time 'exact[s] a high price' (Maxwell 1998:203). Halcomb, Hamilton and Malmstadt (2000:110) state that a lack of *thoroughness* in a plan can be disastrous. Gibbs (2005:80) notes that wrong decision-making may carry destructive force. Wright (2000:202) observes that 'the crisis of leadership' lies in unforgiven errors of decision, and therefore leaders occupy a risky position (Wright 2000:187). Stanley (2006:119) states that leaders are only 'one decision, one word, one reaction away' from damaging years of progress. Thomas (1999:125) notes that many strategies have failed, and Engstrom (1976:24) considers: 'Most [leaders] fail because they do not possess the inherent capacity to take the necessary and right actions'.

There is indirect evidence, too, that Christian transformational leaders should place a premium on strategic preparedness. This is seen particularly where authors emphasize the crucial importance of effective strategy. 'Timing, creativity, and discipline are crucial skills' (Thomas 1999:31). 'The leader must ... employ tactics that lead to success' (Sanders 1994:113). And 'the leader must perform activities designed to insure' that results conform to plans (Engstrom 1976:179).

Next, consideration is given in the search for signs that Christian leaders, rather than sustaining their strategic advances, may *cease* in their strategic designs.

Stanley (2003:33) observes that Christian leaders may enter situations where they can't move things forward. London (1997:117) states that, 'instead of moving people forward', a leader's time may be 'devoted to handling conflict situations'. And Jenkins (2002:42) notes that there are those leaders who do not have 'the stamina to persist', and should therefore avoid pastoral ministry.

There is indirect evidence that leaders may become strategically inactive. This is seen particularly in the emphasis on the critical need to have a strategy, and to make it work. Stanley (2006:34) considers: 'Accepting the status quo is the equivalent of accepting a death sentence', while Halcomb, Hamilton and Malmstadt (2000:85) state: 'A failure to plan is a plan to fail...' Ministers need 'the character necessary to get *to* and *through* the "No" of the people' (Jenkins 2002:45). Various Christian transformational leadership authors emphasize the importance of 'obedience' to the plan (Guder 1998:186; Van Yperen 1997:257), while Halcomb, Hamilton and Malmstadt (2000:217) state that the leader must demonstrate 'total obedience to the God-inspired vision.'⁶

As before, it is not only unpreparedness and cessation represent external hazards. It is to be expected that such pressures as have been described would elicit an inner, emotional response in leaders. This is the focus of the following sub-section.

⁶ Only on rare occasions does Christian transformational leadership recommend retreat where there is resistance (Maxwell 1998:153; Munroe 2005:247; Stanley 2006:79).

5.2. The emotional cost of strategy

The texts have revealed that the ability to strategize, which is central to Christian transformational leadership, places the leader under significant pressure not to fail. Strategy, if it is not pursued correctly, implies disaster (Gibbs 2005:80), and if it is not pursued at all, a death sentence. This again raises the question as to how Christian transformational leaders respond to such demands *emotionally*. In this regard, the literature yet again reveals considerable distress.

Blackaby and Blackaby (2001:65) state that the need to 'develop a plan to achieve the results ... can put enormous pressure on leaders'. Thomas (1999:133) notes that strategic issues ('the interplay and balance between ... systems') cause considerable difficulty and require considerable attention by the leader. Sanders (1994:121) likewise reflects, maintaining that the need for correct discernment leads to pressure and perplexity. Gangel (1997:40) notes that there is 'fear of making a wrong decision, fear of the consequences that might ensue'. Ford (1991:92) notes that leaders are 'fearful that ... plans—or even God's cause—will fail.' Stanley (2006:36) states: 'Even when armed with all the reasons why we should not be afraid [about being wrong], the fear remains'. Banks and Ledbetter (2004:97) quote Patricia La Barre: 'How do we act when the risks seem overwhelming?' Wofford (1999:136) explains that 'the dangers of failure or discouragement haunt us in our work and personal life', while Ford (1991:280) refers to the need for leaders to overcome the fear of failure which is attached to decision-making.

All in all, heavy demands attach to the ability to strategize. Again, while one would expect that Christian leadership involves some strain,

the above would appear to reveal *abnormal* strain in the context of Christian transformational leadership.⁷

6. Summary

The purpose of this survey has been to examine the nature of influence in Christian transformational leadership, along with two of its most important aspects, namely, persuasiveness and the ability to strategize. By employing a semantic, or deconstructionist critique, difficulties have been suggested which might ordinarily remain submerged in the texts.

While it has not been the intention of this article to provide an interpretation of the findings, an obvious suggestion is that the heavy demands inherent in Christian transformational leadership, and the heavy emotional toll described, may be connected with statistics which show up to 95 per cent dropout from Christian ministry in the U.S.A.⁸

With this in mind, and in light of the fact that various alternative models of Christian leadership exist (Scarborough 2011:17), this article may provide an impetus to examine the theory of Christian transformational leadership more closely.

⁷ While there has been little if any emphasis on the *positive* in this article, there is in fact not much to report. While Christian transformational leadership is not exclusively portrayed as being a burden in the literature, it is rarely portrayed as being sustainable (Hybels 2002:195) or joyful (Clinton 1988:77; Holcomb, Hamilton and Malmstadt 2000:253).

⁸ According to Chun (2007:2), dropout in the U.S.A. may be as high as ninety-five percent, while Gibbs (2005:79) gives a figure of fifty percent dropout from local-church ministry in the U.S.A. during the first ten years. If dropout should remain constant over the duration of ministry, Gibbs' figure comes to within two percent of Chun.

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