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## LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND SUCCESSION PLANNING: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE FOR AN ETHICAL RESPONSE

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Succession planning and management (SP&M) is a critical process for the long-term viability of an organization. Replacement continuity and leadership development are both essential for the process to work effectively. In Apostle Paul's epistles to Timothy and Titus, he established what might be considered the first formal SP&M program for the early church. Socio-rhetorical interpretation using intertexture, sacred texture, and social and cultural texture analysis reveals that experience, character, and appropriate capabilities established the basis for Christian leadership succession. Although contemporary SP&M applications have some similarities, they fail to generate the same level of moral scrutiny or dedicated effort, which places today's organizations in a tenuous position. Going forward, organizations should consider the values and determination of the early church, placing more emphasis on SP&M—particularly on leadership development.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The early Christian church formed during a time of enormous change and tremendous pressure. To weather this onslaught, Jesus and his apostles selected, trained, and prepared successors to facilitate the spread of the gospel and ensure the church's survival. This Biblical model of succession planning played a vital role in providing development and continuity. Paul's epistles to Timothy and Titus provide particularly revealing attributes regarding the selection and development processes used by the early church for establishing and perpetuating competent, values-based leadership. Exegetical analysis of these and related scriptures using socio-rhetorical

interpretation<sup>1</sup> reveals a deliberate process based on core values, competency models, and appropriate leadership qualities. Intertexture analysis, sacred texture analysis, and social and cultural texture analysis<sup>2</sup> demonstrate that experience, character, and capability were all requisites.

Christ initiated the process of succession planning for the Christian church by selecting and developing the apostles, who later selected and developed others. This process, critical to the early church, is vital to all sustainable organizations. Although there are many differences between the early church and modern organizations, today's leaders can learn important lessons from the approach to succession used by the early church. To facilitate that learning, this essay focuses on the Biblical model of succession planning and its fundamental role in providing development and continuity. It extends the analyses to contemporary applications of succession planning, highlights some of the similarities, identifies some of the gaps, and draws conclusions based on the implications generated throughout the essay.

## II. FOUNDATIONAL SCRIPTURES

Apostle Paul's epistles to Timothy and Titus establish the foundational scriptures for this essay. In 1 Timothy 1:2, Paul referred to Timothy as "my loyal child in the faith."<sup>3</sup> Paul provided Timothy with encouragement, instruction, and a warning about false doctrine (1 Tm 1:1-11). In the third chapter, Paul provided Timothy with a detailed explanation of requirements for bishops<sup>4</sup> and deacons.<sup>5</sup> He gave these instructions to ensure clear expectations for those who were to lead the church of the living God and to leave no doubt about the truth. "Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory" (1 Tm 3:16). In a similar manner to the way Paul instructed Timothy, Paul trained Titus, referring to him as "my loyal child in the faith we share" (Ti 1:4). Beginning with the fifth verse, Paul explained the mission he had for Titus: "appoint elders in every town . . . someone who is

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<sup>1</sup> Vernon Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-rhetorical Interpretation* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> All scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>4</sup> "The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way—for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil" (1 Tm 3:1-7).

<sup>5</sup> "Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not indulging in much wine, not greedy for money; they must hold fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them first be tested; then, if they prove themselves blameless, let them serve as deacons. . . . Let deacons be married only once, and let them manage their children and their households well; for those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus" (1 Tm 3:8-13).

blameless, married only once, whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious” (vv. 5, 6). Paul then described requirements for bishops to Titus.<sup>6</sup>

In his epistles to Timothy and Titus, Paul established a framework for the selection and development of future Christian leaders. He set a precedent for core Christian values, he established a competency model, and he identified character expectations for Christian leaders. In essence, he created the first formal succession plan for the early Christian church.

### III. SOCIO-RHETORICAL INTERPRETATION

Intertexture analysis,<sup>7</sup> sacred texture analysis,<sup>8</sup> and social and cultural texture analysis<sup>9</sup> facilitate understanding of Paul’s instructions to Timothy and Titus. During Christ’s earthly ministry, he selected twelve apostles, whom he taught and developed in “the way.”<sup>10</sup> After the death of Judas,<sup>11</sup> in accordance with the book of Psalms,<sup>12</sup> the apostles replaced Judas with Matthias.<sup>13</sup> Later, however, God added another apostle to their ranks when Saul of Tarsus met Jesus on the road to Damascus.<sup>14</sup> Saul’s dramatic conversion to Christianity and fervent teaching of the gospel established Saul (also known as Paul) as one of the great leaders of the early church.<sup>15</sup>

Consistent across Apostle Paul’s epistles, he acknowledged God’s sovereignty. Paul also acknowledged his personal responsibility to preach the gospel and the importance of focusing on Christ as the head of the church. Trust, obedience,

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<sup>6</sup> “For a bishop, as God’s steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or addicted to wine or violent or greedy for gain; but he must be hospitable, a lover of goodness, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled. He must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it” (Ti 1:7-9).

<sup>7</sup> Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 40-70.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-131.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-94.

<sup>10</sup> Mt, Mk, Lk, and Jn.

<sup>11</sup> Mt 27:3-5 and Acts 1:16-18.

<sup>12</sup> Acts 1:20-22: “For it is written in the book of Psalms, ‘Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it’; and ‘Let another take his position of overseer.’ So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.”

<sup>13</sup> Acts 1:23-26: “So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.’ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.”

<sup>14</sup> Acts 9:1-6: “Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’”

<sup>15</sup> Acts 9:10-28:31, Rom, 1 and 2 Cor, Gal, Eph, Phil, Col, 1 and 2 Thes, 1 and 2 Tm, Ti, and Heb.

righteousness, and Christ-like living are also consistent themes. Unique in his epistles to Timothy and Titus are his explicit instructions for bishops and deacons: leaders of the church.

Paul made it clear that church leadership was “a noble task,”<sup>16</sup> which required wholesome living,<sup>17</sup> an ability to teach,<sup>18</sup> a well-managed household,<sup>19</sup> and experience.<sup>20</sup> Leaders were to be peace loving, not lovers of money.<sup>21</sup> Paul noted that outsiders should find church leaders respectable.<sup>22</sup> He also noted that church leaders were to be serious, ethical, strong in faith, and of clear conscience.<sup>23</sup> He specified that they should be tested and proven blameless.<sup>24</sup> He noted that they were to be married only once,<sup>25</sup> and that they should have achieved “a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”<sup>26</sup>

Paul’s writings<sup>27</sup> attest to the deity of God and Jesus Christ. These “sacred texts”<sup>28</sup> reveal the nature of God and the unique, holy relationships of Jesus Christ to God and his church. They reveal a divine history and God’s redemptive plan for humankind through Jesus Christ. They also reveal the commitment required of disciples and apostles. This commitment to righteous living and obedience to Christ helped to establish religious community; however, ensuring that future Christians would meet these standards in perpetuity required training, coaching, and mentoring for the development of ethical church leadership.

Christianity was a fledgling counterculture,<sup>29</sup> struggling to survive amongst the dominant culture<sup>30</sup> of Rome and the subculture<sup>31</sup> of second temple Judaism.<sup>32</sup> In an attempt to establish a better society, the Apostle Paul advocated grace in contrast to violence or legalism.<sup>33</sup> Christ provided an alternative to rebelling against Rome or submitting to extreme Jewish legalism. In Christ, Christians could find new hope and a constructive image of how people and society should behave. For this counterculture to survive, Christianity needed a clear mission, consistent core values, and leadership grounded in Christian faith. Paul’s instructions, teachings, and leadership development efforts established a succession planning program to perpetuate these essential constructs.

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<sup>16</sup> 1 Tm 3:1.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Tm 3:2-3.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Tm 3:2.

<sup>19</sup> 1 Tm 3:4-5.

<sup>20</sup> 1 Tm 3:6.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Tm 3:3.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Tm 3:7.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Tm 3:8-9.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Tm 3:10.

<sup>25</sup> 1 Tm 3:12.

<sup>26</sup> 1 Tm 3:13.

<sup>27</sup> Rom, 1 and 2 Cor, Gal, Eph, Phil, Col, 1 and 2 Thes, 1 and 2 Tm, Ti, and Heb.

<sup>28</sup> Vernon Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 120-131.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

<sup>32</sup> Richard A. Horsley and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom: How Jesus and Paul Ignited a Revolution and Transformed the Ancient World* (New York: Grossett/Putnam, 1997).

<sup>33</sup> Acts; Horsley and Silberman, *The Message*.

#### IV. IDENTIFICATION AND ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS

Contemporary succession planning involves a progressive, generational approach to ensure organizational sustainability and leadership development.<sup>34</sup> By progressively planning for succession at the chief executive level, the direct reports of the chief executive, and then mid-level managers, organizations can help to ensure continuity. By developing talent pools, an organization can ensure bench strength and mitigate the impact of both planned and unplanned turnover.<sup>35</sup> At the highest level of preparation, organizations account for external talent pools as well as those within the organization. Rothwell<sup>36</sup> established a range of criterion for “systematic succession planning and management”<sup>37</sup> in a “fifth-generation approach.”<sup>38</sup> The following list highlights some of those considerations:

- Assessment of present requirements
- Assessment of future requirements
- Appraisal of individual performance
- Assessment of an individual’s future potential
- Establishing individual development plans
- Establishing competency models for targeted groups
- Evaluating the succession planning program
- Providing a statement of values to govern the effort<sup>39</sup>

Similar to the succession planning criteria of the early church, today’s SP&M programs provide consideration for experience and capability. Both programs include formal guidelines, and they both have guidelines for the values driving the effort. Then, as now, it was important for leaders to achieve good standing and be bold in their convictions. However, the early church had some unique and valuable characteristics. The vision, mission, purpose, and objectives of the early Christian church were centered on Christ. Leadership development focused on the ability of future leaders to *teach* and spread the gospel of Christ through a process that reflected Christ’s righteousness and obedience to God. This involved training, coaching, and mentoring to provide support for tactical application and strategic direction. The competency model for the early church set very high moral expectations for the experience, character, and capabilities of future leaders.<sup>40</sup>

Although today’s selection committees claim that high ethical standards are important for today’s leaders, charisma, experience in a high profile organization, and perceived persona play a much stronger role.<sup>41</sup> Values congruency, perpetuation of

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<sup>34</sup> William Rothwell, *Effective Succession Planning: Ensuring Leadership Continuity and Building Talent from Within*, 3rd ed. (New York: AMACOM, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-81.

<sup>40</sup> 1 Tm and Ti.

<sup>41</sup> Rakesh Khurana, *Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

values, and long-term organizational consequences do not seem to have nearly as strong of an influence in today's decision process. Furthermore, in contrast to the early church, where money and material gain were not of primary concern, in today's organizations, shareholder value and material wealth have taken on a much greater motivating force.<sup>42</sup> CEO turnover may be one consequence of this phenomenon.<sup>43</sup>

There are many obstacles to accomplishing effective succession planning programs: lack of support, politics, a quick-fix mentality, poor visibility, dramatic change, excessive paperwork, and too many meetings can hamper SP&M efforts.<sup>44</sup> Other barriers to succession planning include "inadequate funding, weak development plans, and difficulty in tracking performance."<sup>45</sup>

Recently, there has been a migration from promotion to knowledge transfer,<sup>46</sup> as disruptive restructuring and reorganization place an increased premium on knowledge management and leadership development.<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, for the reasons stated above, the reality is that most organizations do not have a defined and structured program.<sup>48</sup> Many CEO's have not identified a successor to their position,<sup>49</sup> and far too many organizations do not know who would replace their president or chief executive if they were to resign unexpectedly.<sup>50</sup>

Another troubling issue with succession planning is a trend in recent decades for organizations to look externally for a charismatic corporate savior.<sup>51</sup> A constrained market for a limited number of candidates in a very secretive process leads to CEO selections that are less analytical and less rigorous than they should be.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, the rise of power in the external constituency base of large, public organizations encourages selection of charismatic personas instead of candidates that may be better suited for the long-term interests of the organizations hiring them.<sup>53</sup> The social construction of boards and member relationships with other executives and search firms tends to "hijack" the process and limit the number of plausible outcomes.<sup>54</sup>

The preceding consequences create an environment that challenges the legitimacy of today's SP&M process and the outcomes of that process. In an effort to meet the high expectations of the constituency groups involved, CEO's often look for short-term solutions for raising shareholder prices. They frequently ignore the "human

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Eileen McKeown, "Turbulent Times Highlight the Need for Succession Planning," *T+D* 64, no. 1 (January 2010): 18-19; John Helyar and Carol Hymowitz, "The Recession is Gone, and The CEO Could Be Next," *Bloomberg Businessweek* (February 7-13, 2011): 24-26.

<sup>44</sup> Rothwell, *Effective Succession*, 69-76.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew Paradise, "Many Barriers Inhibit Success of Succession Planning," *T+D* 64, no. 6 (June 2010): 60-61.

<sup>46</sup> William J. Rothwell, "The Future of Succession Planning," *T+D* 64, no. 9 (September 2010): 50-54.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Kleinsorge, "Expanding the Role of Succession Planning," *T+D* 64, no. 4 (April 2010): 66-69.

<sup>48</sup> "Succession Planning in C-Suite Is Lagging," *T+D* 64, no. 1 (2010): 23; Paradise, "Many Barriers Inhibit."

<sup>49</sup> "Succession Planning," 23.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Rakesh Khurana, *Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>52</sup> Khurana, *Searching for a Corporate Savior*.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

equation”<sup>55</sup> and overlook the cultural impact of downsizing, re-engineering, outsourcing, and other cost cutting processes. Those attempts to improve organizational performance in the short-term often fail because leaders do not fully appreciate their long-term impact on people and organizational culture.<sup>56</sup>

## V. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Succession planning is essential for continuity and leadership development. That was true for the early Christian church, and it is true for contemporary organizations. Then, as now, leaders recognized the need to have a succession planning program. Nevertheless, too many contemporary organizations are practicing an approach to succession planning that is not working. Instead of establishing SP&M programs that develop leaders for the future, many organizations do not even have formal plans in place to replace senior leaders. This places many of today’s organizations in a weak position, lacking leadership bench-strength and making them vulnerable to an environment that is more demanding than ever.

It is worth noting that Paul was not one of the twelve original apostles. Sometimes it is necessary to bring someone into an organization from the outside. However, Paul’s Jewish heritage and powerful conversion uniquely qualified him for his new responsibilities. He was committed to the vision of Christ, he studied under the tutelage of Christ and those that had been with Jesus during his earthly ministry, and he was familiar with Roman and Jewish culture. Furthermore, Paul was passionate about developing future leaders, equipping them through training, coaching, and mentoring processes that ensured consistent values.

When contemporary organizations look for a charismatic leader from the outside, too much of their motive is to impress external constituents. Since the process sometimes lacks appropriate scrutiny, organizations select leaders that do not always meet the long-term needs of the organization. This process can also fail to develop internal leaders.

Today’s organizations should dedicate more effort to SP&M programs. Furthermore, they should take the development of future leaders more seriously. The goal should be for replacement continuity and leadership development to ensure long-term sustainability. When these organizations establish succession planning and management programs, they would benefit from the simplicity of the three core constructs of the early church: select leaders with the right experience, select leaders with the right character, and select leaders with the right competencies for the job. Finally, they should have the will to ensure the viability of their organizations by training, developing, and nurturing future leaders.

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<sup>55</sup> Jeffrey Pfeffer, *The Human Equation* (Boston: Harvard Business School, 1998).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

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