Charismatic Leadership Theory: 
A Shadow Side Confessed

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Religious leaders cannot escape the pervasive mood in American society that leaders are not to be trusted. At the same time, there is a cry for leadership. As John Gardner has expressed, “A great many people who are not given to juvenile fantasies want leaders—leaders who are exemplary, who inspire, who stand for something, who help us set and achieve goals.” No one is surprised by the latest news of a fallen church leader, but many are embarrassed or saddened that society does not view religious leaders showing an alternative way to lead in our society. Leadership is no longer sanctioned by any office, including the religious office; leadership is now a trust and respect to be earned among followers. According to Robert Greenleaf, we live in a time when “holders of power are suspect and actions that stem from authority are questioned. Legitimate power has become an ethical imperative.”

Greenleaf’s way toward the ethical imperative is enlisting “serving leaders” who participate in and create serving institutions—all institutions—including government, business, education and religious. The best test, but most difficult to administer in evaluating one’s own servant-leadership, is in responding to two questions: Do “those being served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And, what is the effect [of one’s leadership] on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived.”

No Christian leaders in their confessional theology have turned their back on being a servant-leader as prescribed and practiced by Jesus. Nor do many leaders at the top confess the dissonance or ambiguity of an operational theology that in practice embraces an autocratic, “controlling” leadership in a religious hierarchy. Yet, in the

2As we write this draft, it was reported on the evening news that a priest was arrested for possession of drugs; he was smoking crack in his pipe while writing out his sermon for next Sunday.
4Greenleaf, Servant Leadership, 13-14.
memories of many of us who call a Pentecostal heritage home, there are experiences with leaders whose ministries have been certified as successful, but to whom servanthood is an enigma—autocratic leadership remains the “bottom-line” operational rule of the roost.

**Charismatic Leadership Theory**

A clue to understanding contemporary church leaders, including those in the Pentecostal-charismatic tradition, is found in charismatic leadership theory, according to Max Weber and contemporary leadership theorists.6 Charisma used in two letters of the Apostle Paul—Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12—is a “gift of grace” used to describe the participation of people in the body of Christ. Such gifts were determined as from God; they were not prescribed roles determined by other humans. Max Weber expanded this theological term into a leadership concept that described its authority not from rules, traditions or positions, but from the extraordinary characteristics of an individual person. In 1947, Weber defined charisma as follows:

... a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptionally powers or qualities. These are such as not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader.... What alone is important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his 'followers' or 'disciples.'7

Central to Weber’s view of charismatic leadership was his contrast of charisma with other types of authority, such as rational authority (impersonal, formalized body of rules found primarily in bureaucratic organizations), or traditional authority (legitimized leadership through established customs found primarily in feudal and pre-industrial traditions). Charismatic authority included the dynamic trust induced in followers by a leader because of the leader’s exceptional giftedness.8

The legitimacy of charismatic leadership was based on two major conditions: (1) there would be a need, aspiration or goal among followers that remained unfulfilled by an existing social order; and (2) there would be a leader to whom followers would submit based on their belief in his or her possession of charisma—qualities that fulfilled their

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6The field of leadership is proliferating at a fast rate. We have only included selected theorists pertinent to the discussion.
