Reading the 'Two Books':
a Christian approach to organisational leadership
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This article discusses the question, 'What is Christian leadership?' A popular view is that Christian leadership is simply leadership in agreement with the values and norms of the Bible. It is suggested that this view has the wrong expectations of the Bible and also undervalues the contribution of organisation science. Proceeding from the notion of the 'two books' as developed in the Reformation, the relation between the Bible and organisation science is investigated, and the specific contributions of both 'books' to the idea of Christian leadership elaborated. It is suggested that Christian leaders should first and foremost reflect on the 'core values' of their organisation. In addition, they have to think through how these core values are 'translated' in practical objectives and processes.

Introduction
The question, 'What is Christian leadership?' is engaging many Christians in responsible positions in church, society and business. They are asking themselves how they can serve their fellow-Christians, fellow-citizens and fellow-workers in a truly Christian way as they give leadership to the organisations entrusted to them. Such Christians rightly believe that Scripture is a guide for all areas of life, and so also for all types of organisations in different areas of society. A popular view is that Christian leadership is leadership in agreement with the values and norms of the Bible. In this approach there is a strong emphasis on moral behaviour (rights and wrongs) and personal character (Christian virtues such as integrity, truth-telling, respect, and so on). A widely applied method is to study biblical leaders like Moses, Solomon, Nehemiah, Jesus Christ, Paul and so on. These leaders are looked to as role models for a personal relationship with God, for moral behaviour in everyday practice, and for virtues that need to be cultivated.

This approach is obviously valuable. It recognises that the values and norms of the Bible are of utmost importance for our daily life. It challenges Christian leaders to read the Bible, to adopt appropriate biblical wisdom, and to transfer that wisdom to everyday practice. In this approach the main 'ethical movement' is from the Bible to the organisation. It is based on two tacit presuppositions. The first is that biblical values and norms cover the whole field of organisational practice. The second is that biblical values and norms can straightforwardly and directly be applied within or translated to organisations. However, both presuppositions are problematic. Given the wide cultural difference between the world of the Bible and our modern technological society, we very easily expect too much from the biblical text itself. The contemporary organisational context is so complex that no direct or immediate application or translation is possible. For example, the Bible teaches us respect for 'servants' and 'slaves'. However, these guidelines do not cover and cannot be applied easily in a situation where an organisation has to lay off employees in a case of decreasing turnover. Additionally, an undesirable side-effect of this approach could be that the insights of management science relevant to ethical dilemmas are discarded. This side-effect brings up the topic of the relation between the Bible and management science.

God, Bible and Creation
What is Christian leadership? My own approach to the question starts from the confession that the whole of reality is created by the Word of God. The most impressive account of this confession is found in the first chapter of the book Genesis that describes the creation of heaven and earth. Other impressive accounts are found in the psalms that praise the greatness of the Lord in the creation (e.g.,

Psalms 8, 19, 147 and 148). In the New Testament the idea of creation by the Word of God is extensively described in the prologue of the Gospel of John and in 1 John. In the Bible God is presented as a lawgiver who imposes his laws on creation. For example, in Job 28:26 we read that 'He made a decree for the rain'; in Job 38:11, that God said of the sea, 'This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt'; and in Jeremiah 5:22 that the Lord declares, 'I made the sand a boundary for the sea, an everlasting barrier it cannot cross'. The Bible presents God as a lawgiver who is intimately present in his creation by determining its boundaries and relationships.

In the Christian tradition the relation between God and His creation has been reflected on extensively. I take my cue especially from an important insight of Reformation thought. In the Reformation, the relation between God and creation was characterised by the idea of the 'two books': the book of the Bible and the book of 'nature'. It was believed, in the first place, that we can understand God's will for human behaviour by reading the book of the Bible, implying a right and duty of all believers to study Scripture. But it was also believed that we can understand God by reading the book of nature. This belief implied the right and the duty to investigate nature with scientific means in order to discover the laws of God implanted within created reality. The idea of the two books was so fundamental that it was given a prominent place in the Belgic Confession of 1571. Article 2 confesses that we can know God firstly from nature (his eternal power and divine nature), and secondly in a 'more clear' and 'more complete' manner from the Bible (in order to honour him and to be saved). It is very remarkable that this confession opens with the revelation of God in nature ('firstly') and characterises the revelation of God in the Bible as complementary ('more clear' and 'more complete').

The Belgic Confession challenges Christian leaders to investigate not only the Bible but also the reality of organisational life itself as part of 'nature'. Thus, firstly, management science has much to teach about the dynamics of organisations and the nature of organisational leadership. These results have to be taken seriously because they disclose something of how God has created human organisational reality. For example, while doing research for my book *Trust and Power on the Shop Floor* I found clear evidence that empowerment of employees leads both to better trust relationships within organisations and to better performance. Such insights ought not to be ignored by Christian leaders. Secondly, the Bible teaches us

much about the meaning of life, human values and Christian virtues, and these teachings provide guidance and direction as we develop our organisational activities. They call managers to lead employees in such a way that they will experience their labour as truly meaningful and not merely instrumental to some external or material purpose. This can be realised, among other ways, by explaining what might be called the 'societal surplus value' of their work, or by arranging visits to customers. Managers should develop organisations in such a way that human values and Christian virtues can flourish, and management science can teach us a great deal about employer-employee relationships and suitable organisational processes towards these ends. Management science also can say something about the meaning of labour, proper organisational values, and the characteristic virtues of leaders. However, such science needs biblical revelation for a 'more clear' and 'more complete' understanding of these things. It is certainly the case that reading both books together can result in tensions or conflicts, perhaps even apparent contradictions. For example, some Christians responded to the argument of *Trust and Power on the Shop Floor* by claiming that empowerment of employees is in conflict with the biblical view that a boss has authority over his employees. However, such debates should urge us to continue our investigations into the relationship between empowerment and authority: the worst thing we could do in such a situation is to relax the tension or to resolve the conflict simply by abandoning one of the two books.

The second characteristic of Christian leadership is the confession about God that all things are 'from him and through him and to him' (Rom. 11:36). A comparable confession is given in Colossians 1 about Jesus Christ. 'From him' means that all things find their origin in God (Christ), 'through him' that all things find their existence in God (Christ), and 'to him' that all things find their destiny in God (Christ). The expression 'from him' refers to the creative activity of God, noted above. The expression 'through him' should bring home to leaders the fact that they are dependent on God in all aspects of their leadership. It focuses on the power of God and not on the power of the leader. This confession should determine our attitude as a leader: it should keep us humble. The expression 'to him' describes the objective of all our activities: to honour God. This means that the defining objective of a leader cannot be to make money, to fight competitors or to conquer the market. On the contrary, the objective is to serve

God and fellow-man. I give some examples of this below.

In conclusion, biblical revelation suggests three perspectives from which we may think about Christian leadership:

a. a scientific perspective: the right and the duty to put to use (critically) the fruits of management science;
b. a biblical perspective: biblical values and virtues to guide the direction in which employees are led and in which organisations are developed;
c. a spiritual perspective: the importance of dependence on God and of seeking to honour him.

Organising and Organisations

How might this these considerations influence Christian leadership? A fruitful approach to answer this question is to investigate organisations from three points of view:

i. What are our core values? ('What is important?')
ii. What are our core objectives? ('What should we accomplish?')
iii. What are our core processes? ('How should we accomplish the objectives?')

Core values

The first question – what are our core values? – urges us to reflect critically on what is truly important in doing business. In management literature the metaphor of 'business as a money maker' is regularly employed, as if the essential objective of the enterprise is simply that: to make money. It suggests that increasing share value (the financial value of stocks on the stock market) is the most important target of a business leader. I think this is empirically false. In the first place, a simple analysis of business enterprises shows that the essential objective of an enterprise – what really drives it and best explains its behaviour – is after all not to make money but to deliver services and products to customers. Profit can best be seen as a reward from the customer for delivering a successful service or product.

In the second place, there is no recognised biblical value of simply 'making money'. The most important biblical values are given in the summary of the law: to serve God and to serve our fellow human beings. This means that Christian leaders have to examine fundamentally what is important in their business. Let me suggest a clear example of what I mean. A stated core value of the hotel chain Marriot is that customers 'feel they're among friends'. From a Christian point of view such a core value expresses something of the dignity of the human being, i.e. the customer. In the daily practice of this company, this value was no mere 'window dressing' but guided their corporate activities. J. William Marriot, Sr., the founder of the Marriot Corporation, initiated elaborate employee screening, training programmes, and 'indoctrination' processes to ensure and to reinforce the commitment to the idea of guests as friends. He continuously emphasised that the service to the customers had to be improved every day. His son J. William Marriot, Jr., visited every year about 200 Marriot facilities to experience eating in his own restaurants and sleeping in his own hotels. He institutionalised continuous improvement based on customer reports.

Core objectives

The second question – what are our core objectives? – urges us to reflect on what we seek to accomplish in running an organisation such as a company. Fundamentally, there must be a direct relationship between the core values and the core objectives of the company. Where the company is really seen as a money maker we are not surprised when the main objectives are simply to increase profit by x % and share value by y %. However, when the core value expresses a valuable contribution to society then quite different objectives come into play. In one way or another these values are, or should be, 'translated' into concrete objectives. Consider another good example. A stated core value of the pharmaceutical firm Merck is 'preserving and improving human life'. Such a core value may mean that the pharmaceutical company develops medicines that can contribute substantially to the quality of human life even though they make a small (or even no) positive difference to profit levels. This was what actually happened. By accident, Merck came across a drug that could have the potential to cure river blindness, a disease that has infected over a million people in the Third World. They decided to develop this drug further although they knew that (potential) customers could not afford it. They failed to get support from government agencies and third parties for production and distribution. In the end, Merck elected to do the distribution at their own expense and to give the drug away free . Thus Merck showed by developing a drug to cure river blindness that they took their core value seriously. In conclusion, the core objectives of an organisation show the extent to which non-financial values are really important.

Core processes

How should the objectives be accomplished? How can all organisational activities be orchestrated towards an effective organisational process? Generally, core values and core processes have a powerful influence on the design of the organisation. In principle, we can make a distinction between three interrelated phenomena: the structure of the

organisation (as this can be 'read' from the organisational chart), the culture of the organisation (how employees behave in daily practice), and the style of management (the behaviour of leaders). All these three phenomena are influenced by the core values and core objectives.

Consider an example from the health care sector. Many health care organisations in the Netherlands affirm the value of patient-centred care. Such a value has a strong influence on, for example, the actual organisation of the hospital. In the past all activities in a hospital were organised around specialists and specialisms. As a consequence, it often took several weeks before a diagnosis could be made, because a patient had to see several specialists and had to undergo many different investigations. However, in modern Dutch hospitals all required services are literally organised around the patient. When a patient has a certain disease all specialists can be visited and all required investigations can be done on the same morning in one department. At the end of the morning the team of doctors can make their diagnosis and discuss the treatment process with the patient.

The value of 'patient-orientation' also has a strong influence on the culture of the organisation. It requires that all employees change their behaviour to serve the patient. Finally, this value also has an influence on the style of management. It requires well-trained employees that can make their own decisions. A hierarchical style of management has to be displaced by a more participatory style.

Conclusion

James Collins and Jerry Porras have shown in their book *Built to Last* that values will make the difference in the new economy. I fully agree with their conclusion. For that reason, I would like to suggest that Christian leaders should first and foremost reflect on the values of their organisation. Do they express in one or another way the service to God, fellow human beings, and society? Do they disclose a valuable direction by which to develop the organisation? These questions are especially challenging for Christians who lead organisations that have no explicit Christian background. The next step is to investigate the extent to which the objectives of the organisation are in agreement with the stated values. And the last step is to translate values and objectives in organisational structures and processes. It goes without saying that the execution of these steps is a real challenge. It requires both making use of all the science that is available, and a strong (spiritual) motivation to drive the necessary leadership process.

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For further reading

- Richard C. Chewning, John W. Eby, and Shirley J. Roels, *Business through the Eyes of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990).
- James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, *Built to Last* 3rd ed. (London: Random House Business Books, 2000).
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- Kiyoshi Suzaki, *The New Shop Floor Management: Empowering People for Continuous Improvement* (New York: The Free Press, 1993).
- Maarten J. Verkerk, *Trust and Power on the Shop Floor* (Delft: Eburon, 2004).

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