The Gift of Followership¹ and The Law of Accelerating Returns:
Are We on the Verge of A Paradigm Shift?

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Introduction

My computer spellchecker doesn’t like the word “followership.” With its jagged red line under “followership” this man-made tool is trying to tell me that I’ve made a mistake. There is no such word as “followership” in its memory bank. Scanning my home library I see books on leadership ranging from excellence in corporate leadership to the empowerment of lay leadership but I see no titles regarding “How to be an effective follower.” Many first world cultures are clearly dominated by the notion that the way to make a difference is by being in charge, by being “#1.” To be chosen as an “Apprentice” is often linked with beating out competitors by placing them in an inferior light so as to make oneself appear better and thus become #1. Serving others is not on the priority ladder of success. You are a loser if you are #4 or #3 or even #2. The rugged individualism that helped overthrow the “wild west” of America has not always sought to give recognition to those who were successful in following unless it was a means to eventually becoming #1. Perhaps it is time we pause long enough in our hectic success-driven lives to realize that being an effective follower is not only a divine gift; it is also a biblical mandate and where it is being practiced, exponential membership growth is taking place. It is the purposeful blending of both leadership and followership which is often lacking. Perhaps we should challenge some conventional assumptions.

In 1962 Thomas Kuhn introduced the term “paradigm shifts”² to describe a change in basic assumptions within the ruling theory of science. Since then it has frequently been used in other disciplines as well. For Kuhn, a paradigm (pattern or way of thinking) is not limited to a specific viewpoint or theory, but it also impacts the entire worldview in which it exists. Linked with the worldview are all the implications associated with the paradigm and when a paradigm shift does come it brings with it major changes.³ Sometimes the compelling force for the shift in thinking is nothing more than time itself—the arrival of a new generation. Kuhn, quoting Max Planck, explained it this way:

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³ Although Dee Hock does not call it a paradigm per se, he does advocate the need to review organizational assumptions in order to bring about what he calls the “Birth of the Chaordic Age” when he writes, “Every mind is a room filled with archaic furniture. It must be moved about or cleared away before anything new can enter. This means ruthless confrontation of the many things we know that are no longer so.” Dee Hock, Birth of the Chaordic Age. Berrett-Koehl, San Francisco, 1999, p. 7.
A “new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.” Kuhn’s foundational work was provided yet another leap in philosophical thought within the scientific world by Raymond Kurzweil’s 2001 essay entitled, “Law of accelerating returns.” His proposition was, “Whenever a technology approaches some kind of a barrier a new technology will be invented to allow us to cross that barrier.” He predicts that such paradigm shifts will become increasingly common, leading to “technological change so rapid and profound it represents a rupture in the fabric of human history.” He believes the Law of Accelerating Returns implies that a series of remarkable technological breakthroughs will occur before the end of the 21st century.

Are such barriers and eventual breakthroughs limited to the scientific world? We don’t think so.

For centuries the church has sought to be a change agent within society. Martyrs are strewn through the centuries marking the sincerity and dedication of many who have refused to be dictated to by prevailing values and dictums in their attempts to stand for a purpose even if it meant going contrary to conventional wisdom. With a world population standing at 6.5 billion and a Seventh-day Adventist world membership at over 14 million, and even though we are among the fastest growing Christian denominations in the world, the question remains: How prepared are we for missiological breakthroughs such as the kind which followed Pentecost? Is the church’s infrastructure capable of withstanding change so rapid and profound that a rupture in the fabric of human history would be likely? What kind of leaders will we need? What kind of followers do such leaders need and should help develop? If the world is on the verge of scientific paradigm shifts at the magnitude that Kurzweil suggests, will the church be prepared to face equal or greater changes ahead in its own sphere? Is there anything within the work of the church that would suggest, as Kurzweil’s premise does in The Law of Accelerating Returns, that perceived barriers to our work are in actuality opportunities waiting for paradigm shifts?

Are we close to grasping the cosmic significance of Paul’s

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9 Dee Hock raises three compelling questions: “Why are institutions, everywhere, whether political, commercial, or social, increasingly unable to manage their affairs? Why are individuals, everywhere, increasingly in conflict with and alienated from the institutions of which they are a part? Why are society and the biosphere increasingly in disarray?” Dee Hock, Ibid. pp. 2-3.
vivid description of a universe anticipating radical changes--and the kind which could lead to a dramatic change in “the fabric of human history” as we know it today?

22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? 25 But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. 10

If so, is the church prepared to meet such changes or is there any way of being prepared? Are we prepared with the kind of leadership and followership necessary to accommodate the coming paradigm shifts while maintaining a sense of integrity with the mission which has been entrusted to us? We speak not of change for change sake but a purpose-driven change in response to the call of mission.

We affirm the need to cooperate with and in some instances facilitate a paradigm shift that is already under way in many parts of the world11--a paradigm which does not limit ministry to paid clergy nor followership to the unpaid workers within the church.12 All are leaders and all are followers. It is vital to know when to apply each role as part of an ever expanding relationship with the whole body of believers. When the roles of leaders and followers are confused or abused cultic leadership and followership can lead to disastrous consequences. 13 In more ways than perhaps we would like to admit, this misunderstanding has hindered leaders from achieving the kind of support which would make their leadership even more effective. Confusion in these roles can also limit the contribution that followers can make.

10 Rom 8:22-25 (NIV)
11 One such example is the Homu Knopper Lay Training Centre in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea where students of both genders come to for six weeks of intensive training as “lay” persons at their own expense.
12 Our obsession with expertise can sometimes be a hindrance and at times even produce less than optimum decisions as Surowiecki suggests. “...if you can assemble a diverse group of people who possess varying degrees of knowledge and insight, you’re better off entrusting it with major decisions rather than leaving them in the hands of one or two people, no matter how smart those people are. ... it’s the truth: the value of expertise is, in many contexts, overrated. ... this doesn’t mean that well-informed, sophisticated analysts are of no use in making good decisions. ... It does mean that however well-informed and sophisticated an expert is, his advice and predictions should be pooled with those of others to get the most out of them.” James Surowiecki, The Wisdom of Crowds, Anchor, New York, 2004, pp. 31, 32, 34.
13 An example of abusive and controlling leadership and blind, overly submissive, followership can be seen in the incidents which took place in Jonestown, Guyana. In 1978, Jim Jones’ Peoples Temple composed of 913 followers, including 276 children, who had come to northern Guyana with the hope of establishing a jungle utopia, committed mass suicide at a site called Jonestown by drinking fruit punch laced with cyanide. Behind this mass suicide was a leadership which was characterized by demands of complete control, fanaticism and paranoia. The suicide plan was rehearsed over and over in drills called “white nights.” Included in the practice drills was the giving of small glasses of a red liquid to drink. No one ever knew for sure if it was a drill or the real thing, but the conditioning brought about compliance. Jones claimed to be the reincarnation of Jesus but in the end he ended his life with a gunshot to the head.
Leader presumes follower. Follower presumes choice. One who is coerced to the purposes, objectives, or preferences of another is not a follower in any true sense of the word, but an object of manipulation.  

Healthy and effective leadership and followership is all about creating the kind of environment in which the giftedness granted by God finds opportunity to be freely expressed. It’s not the kind of freedom which searches for the fulfillment of “rights” but a freedom to “minister” and to “serve.” Concepts of superior and subordinate roles need to be scrutinized and viewed with skepticism. Does this suggest that the present emphasis on “lay” ministries is wrong or is it just misleading? Perhaps the growing global realization that ministry does not lie in the hands of a few has awkwardly perched the church on the threshold of the emergence of a paradigm shift which could easily usher in the climax of the Christian era? It is our premise that the huge span between the world’s population and the church’s membership can be more effectively bridged when the principle of “The Law of Accelerating Returns” is allowed to push us to a new appreciation of the real meaning of the “priesthood of believers.” At the same time we must bear in mind that “The future is not about logic and reason. It’s about imagination, hope, and belief.”

The Whole People of God

At the heart of the gospel commission is a dynamic understanding of the church and by dynamic we mean ever changing, ever expanding and ever adapting yet without compromising its mission. Ellen White optimistically describes the church this way,

Enfeebled and defective as it may appear, the church is the one object upon which God bestows in a special sense His supreme regard. It is the theater of His grace, in which He delights to reveal His power to transform hearts.”

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14 Hock, p.67.
15 Matt 20:25-28 (NIV) -- Note the words of Christ, “Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’”
16 Kurzweil’s proposition was, “Whenever a technology approaches some kind of a barrier a new technology will be invented to allow us to cross that barrier.” Wikipedia “Law of accelerating returns,” See also #7.
17 “The WCD [World Christian Database] records that of the 13,094 people groups, 3481 have no known missionary agency or church ministry as of 2005. 244 people groups have less than 10% of their people evangelized; 3830 groups have less than 50% evangelized--most of these, far less. These people groups are referred to as the “A” world, and account for 1.46 billion people. When we add the unevangelized people of the non-Christian “B” world (over 50% evangelized, but not Christian), there are 2.6 billion people who have not yet been evangelized. Remember, we are only referring here to the 2.6 billion who have never heard the very basic gospel of salvation in Jesus, let alone the fuller message of the Bible or the Adventist message.” “The Unfinished Task,” Paper presented by Lester Merklin, Director of the Institute of World Mission, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI.
18 Dee Hock, p. 153. See also Jer. 29:11.
Her description here of the church does not rest upon its organizational structure or financial resources but rather upon the people who minister and who are the recipients of ministry. Those sent to minister do not serve as a reflection of themselves but of the One who sent them forth with the clear purpose: “to reveal His power to transform hearts.” Notice how she describes the work force to accomplish this mission.

Everyone in whose heart Christ abides, everyone who will show forth His love to the world, is a worker together with God for the blessing of humanity. As he receives from the Saviour grace to impart to others, from his whole being flows forth the tide of spiritual life.

No limitation of roles, age, race or gender is referenced. The primary qualifying criterion to minister is a heart in which Christ abides. So all encompassing is this mission that it is having described in Revelation 14:6 as being proclaimed “to all those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people.” It becomes clear that the primary thrust is not about methodologies, organization or even theology per se, but about ministry to those for whom Christ died. Nor is it even primarily about leadership. It is about ministry, a ministry referred to by Paul as the “ministry of reconciliation” and in actuality it is God’s own continuing ministry through the Spirit which directs, empowers and blesses the work of His ambassadors.

Two biblical terms have often confused the organizational and theological landscape of ministry and the confusion over these terms, we propose, has, in part, hindered the church from reaching its full potential as a change agent in many communities. The first is laos and the second is klēros. In many churches today there are two “peoples”—laity, who receive ministry, and “clergy” who give it. The New Testament, however, knows of only one people called the laos which is composed of leaders. It should be noted that two Greek words for “laity” are not used with the first being laikos. It means to “belong to the common people.” It was a term used for Christians in a disparaging sense by Clement of Rome at the end of the first century. The second term, idiōtēs, although used by members of the Jewish Sanhedrin” (see Acts 4:13) is not used by any apostle to describe other Christians. It is a Greek term which conveys the meaning of a layperson as contrasted with an expert or specialist. Stevens summarizes this well:

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20 We are not arguing against organization. It is vital to the support of mission but it is not synonymous with mission.
21 Ibid., p.13. Italics supplied.
22 The concern for governance and roles within church structures is a concern of many, and it does have its place, but “… the twofold questions of laity and women in ministry are almost always tied to this question in contemporary debate. The great urgency always is, Who’s in charge around here? Which is precisely what puts that debate outside the New Testament concerns.” R. Paul Stevens, The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work and Ministry in Biblical Perspective, (Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), p. 149
23 2 Cor. 5:18. (NIV)
25 “Ιδιότης”, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, by Heinrich Schlier, Vol.3, p.215-217, edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Schlier does point out that 2 Cor 11:6 does use the word to refer to Paul not being skilled in eloquent speaking. This actually substantiates our point for even as a leader he was not set apart from the laos into a separate class. His identity was with the people of God.
So the church does not ‘have’ a minister; it is ministry, God’s ministerium. It doesn’t ‘have’ a mission; it is mission. There is one people, one Trinitarian people, one people that reflects the one God who is lover, beloved and love itself, as Augustine once said, and one God is sender, sent and sending. . . . So a theology of the whole people of God should neither be clerical nor anticlerical. What we should embrace is a—clericalism—one people without distinction except in function, a people that transcends clericalism.  

Leaders and Followers

A study of four New Testament passages reveals much more about relationships and community building than they do about control and power in leadership or ignorance. A careful study of John 10:2-4, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, Hebrews 13:7 and 1 Peter 5:2,3 is helpful in understanding the roles of both leaders and followers. It becomes clear that the primary role of the leader is to care for those under her or his charge as well as leading the church or institution to the place where it would be most pleasing for God. In that sense even leaders, as undershepherds of Christ, must know how to be followers. These passages, however, give clear instruction about the role of followers for God’s appointed leaders. Note the relationship of followers to God’s appointed leaders. They are counseled to: “hear his voice,” “follow him,” “recognize them,” “esteem them,” “love them,” “obey” and “submit” to leaders and to “do it with joy.” These are counter-culture terms. They rub raw the sides of independence and individualism. When we look closely at these four key leadership passages we can immediately see that both empowering leadership and obedient followership are consistently taught. While followers are not called to be is either blind or naïve. They are admonished to be submissive to those over them, while at the same time the leader is called to be a servant to those under his direction. It is this dual but paradoxical combination of traits which makes the Christian organization unique. It is also the crucial combination needed if the church is to fulfill its purpose and if it is to allow Christ to be the Chief Shepherd. The success of God’s church depends largely on the ability of leaders to lead and followers to follow but such designations can be confusing. We only have to look at the stories of Korah’s rebellion or the undermining influence of Absalom to see how independent and often misdirected “followers” can hurt the cause of God.

In recent times we’ve seen how important followers are to the success or failure of appointed leaders. The financial debacles by major corporations have sent devastating shock waves around the world. It appears that some need to be reminded of the Scriptural lessons for being effective followers, such as “Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong.” (Ex 23:2) and “Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you” (Deut 6:13-14). Being a follower, then, carries heavy responsibilities. It is ever keeping one’s eyes on the principles of God’s kingdom while providing a support base

26 Stevens, Ibid., pp. 7-8.
28 Numbers 16 and 17.
29 2 Samuel 13-19 (NIV)
for the leaders to carry out their role. When Aaron and Hur saw Moses hands grow weary they “held his hands up” (Ex 17:12) and in so doing they enabled Joshua, a follower of Moses and the leader in battle, to be victorious. Being an effective follower suggests that team work is what it’s all about. But what about Aaron, Hur and Joshua? Weren’t they simultaneously leaders and followers? This is precisely the point that Dee Hock makes when he says,

In the deepest sense, distinction between leaders and followers is meaningless. In every moment of life, we are simultaneously leading and following. There is never a time when our knowledge, judgment, and wisdom are not more useful and applicable than that of another. There is never a time when the knowledge, judgment, and wisdom of another are not more useful and applicable than ours. At any time that “other” may be superior, subordinate, or peer.30

A basic premise of being a true and effective follower is the recognition of ones calling to assist the leader in leading without confusing others as to whom the real leader is. It means believing not only in the leader but also in his calling. It doesn’t mean being blind to weaknesses but it does mean helping the leader maximize his strengths. Sometimes it may mean nothing more than asking key questions or challenging some assumptions. Not all decisions or actions by the leader will be right ones. Mistakes will be made. Abraham, Moses, David, Peter, James and John are all examples of great leaders who were used by God to establish His kingdom. They were also human and subject to making mistakes but that in themselves did not disqualify them as leaders, nor did it justify a boycott of their leadership by their followers. Both leaders and followers have an important role to play. When we succumb to the pressures and stigmas of our own culture, we can minimize the effectiveness of either or both. It is important that recognition be made acknowledging that both leaders and followers have been given a gift. Both are needed and both need nurturing. The challenge presented by Jesus to “Follow me” puts in perspective the roles of both leaders and followers. Followership is a calling, a ministry and a gift. Both leadership and followership play vital roles in building up the kingdom or community of God.

Leaders for a Different Paradigm

The story of Cain and Able is well known. (Gen. 4) Neither was designated as leader or follower. It is clear, however, that Able’s offering was looked upon with favor by the Lord and Cain’s was not. At the outset, the “success” of Able was compared by Cain with his own “failure” resulting in anger and jealousy. Comparisons can often do that. Despite God’s intervention Cain’s jealousy over Able’s success led him to a disastrous conclusion: He must take control over his own “brother” by exercising a “keeping”31

Hock, pp. 72-73
31 “Keepers” are referred to as those who watch over doors, gates, walls, animals, concubines, prisons, etc. It represents a controlling relationship (Gen.4:2; 2 Ki 22:4; Acts 5:23) and hence the reason for Cain’s evasive answer. Five time in the first ten verses of Genesis 4 the word “brother” is used. Cain acted more like a keeper than a brother. (See “Keeper,” Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary, Review and Herald, 1960, p. 621)
response or function. He no longer acted like a brother. His paradigm shifted from seeing Able as his brother to viewing him as an independent competitor. Such thinking led to an obvious conclusion: “I win by causing him to lose.” Eventually the paradigm shifted so drastically that despite God’s attempted intervention, Cain eliminated his brother’s voice by killing him. In so doing Cain did not “win.” He lost. When asked by God, “Where is your brother?” he covered his actions with an evasive and bold lie, “I don’t know. . . . Am I my brother’s keeper?” Reflecting upon this tragic scene Ellen White sees beyond the issues of sibling rivalries and unmasks a principle which leaders must not read lightly,

Any man, be he minister or layman, who seeks to compel or control the reason of any other man, becomes an agent of Satan, to do his work, and in the sight of the heavenly universe he bears the mark of Cain.32

Speaking in a similar vein, Dee Hock sets forth a similar thought,

Compelled behavior is the essence of tyranny. Induced behavior is the essence of leadership. Both may have the same objective, but one tends to evil, the other to good.33

Hock continues by emphasizing four steps to effective and genuine leadership. The first and most critical step is to manage self which would include “one’s own integrity, character, ethics, knowledge, wisdom, temperament, words, and acts.” Secondly, each individual has a responsibility to support those who are “over us” and to whom we often refer as our supervisors. Our response to their leadership is vital and can bring either the best or worst from them and thus impacting the entire organization. Thirdly, he says, we have a responsibility to our own peers over whom we have no authority but with whom our relationship sets the tone or environment in which work is done. Finally, and it is intentionally listed by Hock as the last step, is our responsibility over those for whom we have authority.

Lest we draw the conclusion that we become better leaders and/or followers by simply making a psychological change in our approach, Henri J.M. Nouwen reminds us of the real crux of the matter:

It is not enough for priests and ministers of the future to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow humans and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is, Are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God’s presence, to listen to God’s voice, to look at God’s beauty, to touch God’s incarnate Word and to taste fully God’s infinite goodness?34

33 Hock, p.68.
Conclusion

The family of God is a gifted community empowered for ministry and mission. Its mission is to participate in God’s own mission. “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.”35 Each member is at the same time both follower and leader but regardless of the role, at any given time all are followers of Him who has called. Pentecost stands as a reminder and a beacon of hope when the size of mission seemingly dwarfs the available resources for completing the mission. Pentecost is the epitome of a paradigm shift. The “unqualified” were seen as the very ones turning the world upside down.36 The task of the Great Commission is great yet not greater than the One who has called us to minister in His behalf. We live in stupendous times. Millions are searching for hope in a world that is broken. Opportunities for ministry abound. Autocratic leadership, which “keeps” more than it empowers and artificial boundaries for ministry which divides rather than unites the people of God, will not be able to hold back the winds of the Spirit forever. The Law of Accelerating Returns teaches us that barriers, whether they be economic, geographic, cultural or even attitudinal, will not block forever. The blocking only ensures that eventually there will be rapid paradigm changes and a more grand climax. Some envision dramatic organizational changes and while we cannot sanctify any structural form, we can be assured that wherever God’s people are they will be one body37 working synergistically regardless of their role or function. The context of mission will always be challenging whether it be environmental or political but these cannot and will not halt the momentum of the Spirit’s ever working, always penetrating influence. The distinctive mission entrusted to us in Revelation 14 will be fulfilled. To accomplish the global mission we each will, at times, be both leader and follower but some how in the grand scheme of things it will not matter. The voice of the Shepherd will be the Guide and others will know us not because of who or what we are but because who we know.

This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.’38

35 1 Cor.12:4-6 (NIV)
36 Acts 17:6 (KJV)
37 1 Cor 12:12,13 (NIV)
38 Zech 8:23 Italics supplied.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


