

The Dangers of Hierarchy in Christian Organizations

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This article corresponds to the book

[Christian Leadership](#)

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Hierarchicalism is an organizational structure based on ascending ranks, like a ladder. The military is hierarchical, with generals, colonels, sergeants, on down to privates. Authority is entirely vertical with little or no accountability at the top. Privates cannot hold a general accountable for his actions. Blame is always passed downward.

Large corporations are also structured hierarchies, with CEO's, vice presidents and department managers, on down to those who stock shelves. Again, authority is always from the top down with no accountability at the top. Lower ranks usually take the blame for the errors of management. Officers within hierarchies do not represent the will of their subordinates.

Biblical government is the opposite, fundamentally simple. Officers serve the people in a representative system.¹ When it comes to the relationship of officers to one another, as in a Presbytery,² every member has equal voice and vote. There are no ranks, merely differences in function. If there is blame, it accrues to the group as a whole.

The difference between the two is like a ladder versus a round table. Since the goals and purposes are different, so are their structures.

When Christian organizations mimic the world's system, the central principles Christ taught tend to be thwarted. People become lost in a maze of bureaucracy as a monolithic machine feeds itself rather than the people. The organization focuses merely on its own existence as though that had intrinsic value.

During many years in ministry, I have had opportunity to closely observe the effects of hierarchicalism in a Christian context.

By mirroring the world's structures, Christians may unwittingly forget a central aspect of biblical theology, the corrupt nature of man. In a Christian organization the issue is not efficiency, but sanctification.

Dictatorship is the most efficient form of government known to man. That is why dictators are hard to defeat. They dehumanize people, depriving them of the free expression necessary to reflect God's image. It is the straight line between two points but casualties are strewn along its sides.

To discern the morality of a leadership structure, one should ask what it stimulates ... the fallen nature, or the new nature in Christ.

THE PETER PRINCIPLE: Mediocrity and Incompetence

In his classic book, **THE PETER PRINCIPLE**³, sociologist John Peters describes how each member of a hierarchy tends to rise to his level of incompetence. As a person performs well at one level, he may be promoted to the next, until he attains a position beyond his abilities. He will remain at this position generating problems for himself and others. Meanwhile, many frustrated, yet gifted people abandon ship. With time, incompetence multiplies until the organization as a whole becomes mediocre.

Good Christian leaders, functioning within an hierarchical system, try to mitigate these negative effects. Their efforts may be laudable, but often end up futile. Human nature, including in Christians, is susceptible to the temptations generated by hierarchy.

Hierarchies tend to stimulate the worst in our fallen nature

Arrogance

Hierarchies provide a platform where one person feels inherently superior to those of lower ranks. "I have a superior rank because I am a superior person."

Unholy ambition and jealousy

A person sees another in a rank above his and says to himself, "he is no better than I. In fact, I can do his job better. So why shouldn't I have that rank?"

Dirty politicking

If a person wants a superior rank, he may be tempted to try to pull strings to get it. This is morally questionable and wastes time and energy for productive work.

The Apostle James notes, For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. James 3:16

The term "evil practice" translates **phaulon pragma**, literally "foul business."⁴ "Dirty politicking" expresses it well.

Blame shifting

Human nature has a tendency to blame a subordinate when something goes wrong. Blame shifting was Adam's first reaction after the fall. This is a form of moral cowardice.

Imagine a man carrying a load up a ladder. If he drops it, where does it fall? On whoever is beneath, who in turn, dumps it on the one below him. The guy on the very bottom gets the full load. In a hierarchy, the load is the blame.

Man-pleasing

Since a person's rank in the hierarchy depends on the good will of the rank above him, this tempts him to focus on pleasing the person above him rather than God.

Loss of competent personnel

According to Dr. Peters in **THE PETER PRINCIPLE**, hierarchies tend to squeeze out people who question the way things are done, even if they are highly competent.

A hierarchy, like any organism, becomes more focused on perpetuating its own existence than on what it was created to produce. People who rock the boat will be tossed out of that boat. It doesn't matter if they were among the few doing the rowing.

Disregard of the ordained office and its spiritual authority

I mention this last for emphasis, not because it is least in important. In fact, I consider it the most serious repercussion of authoritarian structures. In a Christian hierarchy, man-made titles or ranks sometimes negate the spiritual authority of biblical ones. The Word of God accords certain rights and privileges to all ordained officers. Hierarchical structures overlook these.

What if you are a leader in an authoritarian Christian hierarchy?

With a little imagination, you can install administrative devices to minimize the damage. Doing so requires a rare moral courage. Why? These strategies require accountability to the people you lead.⁵

Safety devices

Periodic evaluations of your leadership, anonymous and in writing, from the people you lead. This gives subordinates the opportunity to say what they really think and to do it in safety. You will get the truth about your leadership style.

Create an anonymity committee This may consist of two or three people who can receive complaints without revealing the sources. If there are enough complaints about a particular leader, this can be brought to the attention of upper level management before

the leader is able to do serious damage. The reason this requires moral courage is because the leader in question might be you.

Tip: Do not insult the intelligence of your subordinates by announcing an *open door policy* unless they can hold you accountable for what you say or do to them inside the door.⁶

Memos to subordinates about proposed policies asking for their feedback, gives people a sense of participation in the decision process.

Any device that allows you to be vulnerable to your subordinates and accountable for your actions will gain respect and credibility. Ironically, once you have respect and credibility, those devices will likely become unnecessary.

Are you joining a Christian organization?

A good way to discern if the organization is authoritarian is to ask them, “In what way can you be made to stand accountable for the way you treat subordinates?” If you get no answer, look elsewhere.

Summary

Authoritarian hierarchicalism is unbiblical for Christian organizations or churches. It stimulates latent tendencies in our fallen nature. Christian leaders should be aware of these tendencies and establish measures to minimize them. This may require an uncommon moral courage and commitment to absolute integrity and accountability to those we lead.

From this article we learn:

- Authoritarian hierarchicalism is a secular form of organizational structure, antithetical to the leadership principles Christ embodied.
- Authoritarian hierarchicalism stimulates the worst in human nature, leading to arrogance, selfish ambition, politicking, blame shifting and more.
- Christian leaders involved in such structures can mitigate the damage by instituting administrative devices to make themselves approachable and accountable to those they lead.

Smalling's articles and essays are available at www.smallings.com

1. Since I am Presbyterian, I consider Presbyterian-style government to be the best reflection of biblical church government principles.
2. A Presbytery is a council of ministers and elders representing associated churches in a region or large city. It meets to deal with matters in common. The term is derived from the Greek term PRESBITERION, used in 1Tim.4:4.
3. This entertaining little book is a must for anyone trying to understand how hierarchies can become so incompetent.

4. Accordance Bible Software. Oaktree Company: Temecula, CA, 1999
5. Some organizations may insist they are accountable. What they often mean is they are accountable to the next person up the ladder, not to anyone below. This is not accountability in the sense we mean here.
6. An open door policy means telling your subordinates they are welcome to come into your office and discuss their concerns. Most people have enough sense to ignore this offer.