The Atlas Factor

Author and pastor Lance Ford in his book *The Atlas Factor: Shifting Leadership Onto the Shoulders of Jesus* makes a compelling case that the current emphasis placed on the leader ("the guy") of a church and/or organization has compromised the true nature of spiritual leadership. He captures his argument well in these poignant words: *Though we have believed that churches rise and fall on their leader, in reality, everything rises or falls on headship, and the whole body's alignment with that Head. Each individual part (member) can only work properly together if the whole body is properly aligned to its Head: Jesus…Everything rises or falls on the headship of Jesus.*

I found this book to be challenging and at times, convicting, as I evaluated the places I'm prone to default to a traditional paradigm of leadership as opposed to a biblical one.

Check out these Book Notes to provide a window into some possible course corrections in your leadership going forward.

Chuck Olson
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Title: ***The Atlas Factor:*** *Shifting Leadership Onto the Shoulders of Jesus*

Author: Lance Ford

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Book Description:

Most of us are familiar with Atlas, the mythological Greek figure condemned to hold up the heavens. If you have ever been a pastor, no doubt you have felt something similar—being "the leader" often feels like an overwhelming burden.

In an era plagued by the fall of influential pastors, it's time to reconsider our fundamental understanding and application of leadership. *The Atlas Factor* sheds light on the tragic mistake of replacing the God-ordained headship of Jesus with human-made systems and presents a way to realign the body of Christ with its true Head. Only when we shift leadership onto Jesus' shoulders can we become the beautiful, joyful, Spirit-filled expression of the church God intended us to be.

Book Quotes:

In 2012, burdened by the leadership culture that had become pervasive in the church, I wrote a book called UnLeader. Something was off. It was apparent to me that pastors and faith-based leaders—not all, but many—had embraced a leadership system that conflicted with much of what Jesus and the New Testament writers say about leadership. My overarching concern was that, if we continued along this path, not only were many leaders in for a crash, but the church as a whole would be prevented from reaching its potential for fullness in Christ. The reputation of the church and, more importantly, Jesus, was being tarnished. LOCATION:

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My intention for the book you are reading now is to point to some ways we need to reform leadership in the church. By no means do I believe I have all, or even most, of the answers. But I do believe this book contains vital keys to move us in the right direction. And I believe this move starts with shifting leadership onto the shoulders of Jesus, the Head of the church. LOCATION: 164

I am writing for church leaders, church planters, and leaders of faith-based organizations who are willing and even desperate to develop a leadership system and structure that eliminates all barriers to the free flow of the life of God in the body of Christ. LOCATION: 170

Despite our differences, every healthy human body has the same structure and systems. In the church, our fundamental problem is not abuses in the current leadership system; it is the system itself. We have a systemic problem, and it has everything to do with the connection between the Head and the body—the relation between Jesus and his church. LOCATION: 178

If you have ever been a pastor, at some point you have probably identified with Atlas. Being the leader of a church is often overwhelming. Pastors are expected to be the top in-house theologian, communicator, leadership expert, marriage and parenting sensei, CEO, fundraiser, vision caster, managerial expert, decision-maker, and face of the church. And every day echoes the threatening mantra of "everything rises or falls on leadership." In other words, everything rises or falls on you. LOCATION: 206

As a young church planter, I asked one of my church-planting heroes what he believed was the most important ingredient for success. He asked if I was ready for the answer. "Yes, what is it?" I asked eagerly. He said two words: "The guy." My mentor then listed the vital traits necessary to get the job done: "The guy" must be able to draw a crowd, command a room, make tough decisions, kick people off the bus, raise money, cast a compelling vision, be worthy of respect and even be feared to a degree. He then told me "the guy" must keep a measure of distance between himself and his staff. "You can't be friends with your staff. If you do, they won't respect you." LOCATION: 302

When Jesus declared, "It shall not be so among you" (Matthew 20:26), he was countering the culture of the day, where the rulers of the Gentiles lorded it over them. In doing so, Jesus was setting up the ground rules and agreement between himself and those who would represent his name and ways. For those of us who claim to have entered into this agreement, we are declaring we will turn our backs on the way the world's systems fashion leadership. We are taking an oath, "It will not be so among us. We will refuse to use the tactics, processes, and systems that allow any one person to dominate another. We will not use force against one another. We will turn our backs on schemes and policies that suppress truth in order to protect our reputations. We will not elevate ourselves above our brothers or sisters in Christ. We will not leverage rank and title through fear and carnal intimidation. We will refuse to ascend the ladder of status but instead take a knee, with bowl and towel in hand, to wash one another's feet—not in ceremonial rituals but in the perpetual role of servant." LOCATION: 359

The time has come for us to ask if the system of leadership we have unwittingly adopted and given ourselves to has gotten us to this place. In too many cases, we have been convinced that church leadership rises and falls on the individual leader and the structures that keep them in power. LOCATION: 392

In the New Testament, a quick word search in the ESV finds "disciple" used around 260 times, while the word "leader" is mentioned only six times. That is a 43-to-1 ratio! Additionally, any student of Jesus and the writings of the apostle Paul will be familiar with the frequent use of the term "servant." Though it has effectually lost its original meaning, the word "minister" literally means servant. LOCATION: 513

There should be no argument that leadership has become a dominant influence in the minds of pastors. But I don't believe that many church leaders have dug deeply into understanding the foundations of the subject we have been convinced "everything rises or falls" upon. Nothing is more important than who and what we allow our thinking to be influenced by. As the proverb says, "As [one] thinks in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7 NKJV). What we give our time, attention, and energy to determines our priorities. It is therefore imperative that we give ourselves to the right things. LOCATION: 519

To thoughtlessly parrot the axiom "everything rises or falls on leadership" is not a good starting place because it fails to ask what leadership is in the first place. Most importantly, it ignores how Jesus and the writers of the New Testament defined proper, kingdom-based leadership. Is it possible that contemporary Christian leadership is based on something that is not actually Christ-ian? LOCATION: 584

The church is over two thousand years old, but most of the principles we apply today have arisen in the last fifty years. LOCATION: 690

Though we have believed that churches rise and fall on their leader, in reality, everything rises or falls on headship, and the whole body's alignment with that Head. Each individual part (member) can only work properly together if the whole body is properly aligned to its Head: Jesus. Just as a human body can have healthy limbs yet be in a state of paralysis if the spinal system is injured or out of whack, so a church can remain dysfunctional, diseased, or immobilized if the overriding leadership system circumvents proper alignment with the true Head. Everything rises or falls on the headship of Jesus. LOCATION: 1035

Leadership can easily turn into a power trip. People have a propensity to become intoxicated on positional power. If you have ever lived in a neighborhood with a Home Owners Association (HOA), you know this all too well! LOCATION: 1071

In the passage we looked at several times earlier, where Jesus commands his disciples that "it will not be so among you" (Matthew 20:25–28), he says it is the Gentiles who practice lording over and dominating one another. The term "Gentile" is a metaphor for the ways of the fallen world: its systems and mode of operating. Jesus commands his followers to identify and function as servants, not as leaders—especially not the way the world's leaders operate. LOCATION: 1143

Notice Jesus didn't say, "I am over you as the one who leads." He said, "I am among you as the one who serves" (emphasis mine). What a simple yet profound statement! This is servant language. Was Jesus a leader? Without question, he was the best ever! But his identity was as a servant. His leadership was the fruit and outcome of his posture and self-identification as a servant. It was the way he thought. The key to Jesus' way of thinking is the Greek term kenosis: to empty. This is the very thing Paul implores us to do in the following passage: Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. LOCATION: 1150

Do we need leadership in the church? Absolutely. Do we need better leadership? That's an understatement. The error is that we have made leadership a position rather than a product—like fruit and vegetables. The person who cultivates fruit and vegetables does not call herself a tomatoer or a cucumberer; she is a gardener or a farmer, and the outcome of her work is produce—tomatoes and cucumbers. Leadership in the church must be seen in the same way—as an outcome. Good leadership in the church is the fruit of humble servants who have emptied themselves of selfish ambition. In the church, we are all servants, and the outcome of faithful servants is leadership. LOCATION: 1169

When strongly gifted people fail to engage in a process of constant transformation of mind and heart through Christ, they are no longer recalibrating themselves to Christ and therefore no longer exude humility. Narcissism begins to manifest, along with its accompanying character traits. LOCATION: 1202

In the Western world, we admire and idolize strong leaders who derive their authority from status, power, titles, or skills. But godly leadership derives its authority from servanthood, meekness, and sacrifice. Worldly leadership points only to itself and misaligns the body from the headship of Christ, but godly leadership's strength comes from its weakness and dependence on the headship of Christ. If we are to have godly leadership, we must have leaders who relinquish their power and authority and make room for God's power and authority. He must increase, and we must decrease. LOCATION: 1337

The fruit of spiritual leadership is nurtured in the powerless posture of servanthood. LOCATION: 1984

In a fellowship of equals, equality of ability is not the point. Most groups are made up of members with varying levels of skills, giftings, experience, and knowledge. But in a fellowship of equals, there is equality of opportunity, respect, and honor. Everyone carries equal status. LOCATION: 2057

Please hear me on this. Titles have their place in the church … if they are the right titles. If they are not status-based. Role-based titles are useful; they help us focus on our primary tasks and help others connect with those at the frontlines of specific areas. But rank-based titles are different. They set a tone and affect the culture of any group. Up or down, in one direction or the other, they underscore status every time they are spoken or read. Such titles emphasize and highlight boundaries, privilege, and permission. Status titles create sociological and psychological dynamics of exclusivity and hierarchy. LOCATION: 2166

The supermeme of gaining followers thrives on overtalk—where an idea is repeatedly mentioned as true without critical analysis until it becomes widely accepted without question. It is so immersed in our culture that it bypasses critique or deeper examination. The lexicon of our church culture often exposes our allegiance to individuals over allegiance to Jesus as Head of his church. It shows up in the everyday language of staff hierarchy. LOCATION: 2254

One of the most dangerous errors in recent church leadership cultures is creation of the second chair. This is the position or office that often operates under the title of "executive pastor." I've recently heard that some advocates call it "secondary leadership." Not only is this idea erroneous, but it also devastates the giftings of others and feeds the narcissistic domineering power base of the "not so among you" cultures in many churches. By definition, when we hear the word "secondary," we tend to think of something that comes after, is less important than, or is a result of that which is primary. No precedent can be found for such a concept, much less prescription, of first- and second-chair leadership in Jesus' church. There is no "second chair" because there is no "first chair" in the church Jesus builds. LOCATION: 2492

Former Fuller Seminary Professor of Leadership J. Robert ("Bobby") Clinton has influenced thousands of leaders, young and old. His work, which he termed "Leadership Emergence Theory," has been instrumental in helping many understand and navigate the seasons, transitions, and outcomes along the timeline of a leader's life. Don't let the term "leader" sidetrack you. Clinton is the first to advocate for the priesthood of all believers and that leadership in the kingdom of God is not limited to "vocational" ministers. This is for all of us. Like so many others, I was blessed to be a student of Bobby Clinton before he retired. His insight helped me in my late thirties, throughout my forties, and today as I close out my fifties. Clinton studied thousands of leaders throughout history and concluded that there are generally five phases of a leader's life, along with transitions from phase to phase. Clearly, there are exceptions, but time and again this timeline coincides with many people's lifelong development. LOCATION: 2625

Clinton's protégé, Terry Walling, describes five phases of lifelong development:
- Sovereign Foundations (up to early 20s)
- Inner-Life Growth (early 20s–mid-30s)
- Ministry Maturing (late 30s–late 40s)

• Life Maturing (mid 50s–early 60s)
Those who have reached this phase and are faithfully walking it out have discovered and identified their unique calling and accompanying spiritual gifts. Their greatest desire is communion with God, and “success” in ministry is set aside as the primary goal.
• Convergence (somewhere in 60s)
This is the era when everything seems to make the most sense in one’s calling—when everything comes together. God brings a person “into a role that matches his or her gift-mix and experience so that ministry is maximized,” and he or she experiences an even deeper sense of ease of ministry. LOCATION: 2643-2825

Sometimes we love change. At other times we hate it. When we find ourselves in pain, discontented, frustrated, or even depressed, change can give us hope. But sometimes we are so tired or lacking in faith, we don’t have the energy for change. Meaningful change seldom comes without a cost, but refusing to change can be more damaging in the long run. LOCATION: 3083

To repent is to change one’s heart and mind. It is admitting that we are going in the wrong direction; that we are on the wrong track, and we need to turn around…True metanoia (the Greek word for “repentance”) is always evidenced by a turnaround. LOCATION: 3099-3103

As we have seen thus far, the damage caused by the prevailing leadership systems in the modern-day church is incalculable. Those who choose to repent do not do so because leadership hasn’t worked; they do so because they recognize they’ve been part of a system of rebellion against God. LOCATION: 3109

Note: should you wish to find any quote in its original context, the Kindle “location” is provided after each entry.