

Why So Many Christian Leaders Don't Practice What They Preach

During my leadership journey since the early 1980s, I have noticed various gifts among leaders that are not necessarily understood or even taught in seminary nor in theological or leadership books.

For example, when I peruse some of the writings of New Testament scholars (even those whose focus is Pauline writings), the concept of a “master builder” never even comes up in their talks or books—even though it was the way the apostle Paul described himself (1 Cor. 3:10).

Of course, the apostle Paul was both a thought leader (theologian) and a master builder; hence, in rare occasions there is overlap (such as great leaders in history like Martin Luther, John Calvin, St. Augustine, Abraham Kuyper, John Wesley and beyond—including some of our contemporaries) who are both theologians and master builders who left a huge imprint with their ability to think biblically and apply Scripture to the building of gospel movements. However, more often than not, leaders focused on building movements are not necessarily thought leaders and vice versa.

The reason for this, I surmise, is because our knowledge base, insight and vocabulary is largely based upon knowledge we use—not mere head knowledge or abstractions. Consequently, great theologians and New Testament scholars will speak about Paul's theology with great expertise while at the same time bypassing his main missional call, that of a “master builder.”

This is not a criticism but a realization that many of our greatest teachers are not practitioners of what they teach, hence, their limited practice creates a limited framework of

biblical interpretation.

The following are my descriptions delineating between master builders, builders and thought leaders:

Master Builder

The Greek word for master builder (1 Cor. 3:10) is *architekton*—which is where we get our English word, “architect.” This refers to a master builder, expert builder and director of works.

Paul also said that he was a “wise” master builder. The Greek word for “wise” is *sophos*, which means “clever, skillful, experienced, wise, expert.” Hence, Paul was not only a builder—but a wise master builder.

We can see this illustrated as shown in the book of Acts and the Epistles Paul wrote, which shows that he planted churches in over 30 key cities of the Roman Empire, out of which emanated a vast complex network of churches and leaders who worked together to do mission in both local and global arenas. This network included the use of apostolic teams, financial support, apostolic leaders and prayer support that would supply what Paul needed to fulfill his apostolic mandate.

On a local level, the network was held together by the disciples they made and by the elders and deacons that Paul and his team placed as overseers over each of the local churches they planted in each of the cities. (See the pattern exemplar in Acts 14:21-23.)

Paul was a unique apostle. Nowhere else in the New Testament do you see another apostle referred to as a “master builder.” Not Peter, not James, not John. While they all might have been builders, not one of them had the kind of capacity to build complex networks and launch a missionary movement the way Paul did.

In my personal observation, I have only seen a few contemporary master builders in the body of Christ. There are many teachers, mentors and builders but *few* master builders. By a master builder, I am referring to a person who not only has the message of Jesus but is also able to implement a Holy Spirit-inspired method that aptly applies the gospel in such a way as to garner the support of others (through evangelism, discipleship and the networking of other believers and leaders) to create networks and gospel movements.

These master builders are not only visionaries who influence and attract other great leaders but are also able to harness the energy and excitement that arises from their vision through a strategic framework that harnesses vision and creates movement and momentum that catalyzes systemic change in the church place and workplace.

Master builders not only have vision but create systems that create other systems and subsystems with many wheels in motion, so it is sometimes hard to tell who is the overseer of the movement. They understand that the key to any movement is the distribution of labor,

Master builders in the workplace are the entrepreneurs who take the idea of the “mom and pop shop” hamburger and make a franchise out of it (McDonald’s). They take the formula for soda and design a world-class brand out of it (Coca Cola and Pepsi).

These master builders are also able to create the blueprint for a network or coalition effortlessly because it is in their wheelhouse or sweet spot (some of them can put the blueprint for earth-shattering movements on a napkin while having an informal meal).

One of their weaknesses is—as high “D” personality types (doers)—master builders can tend to be frustrated when they are around other leaders who only know how to give a good talk

but have no practical understanding or ability to implement their ideas. Thus, they are sick of talk; they only want to do.

Builders

Builders are those who can create a network or coalition, but mostly a self-contained network with limited success or influence (perhaps with a community rather than a national or international dynamic).

Such a person may even be an effective church planter who can give themselves to one or several churches for the rest of their life without creating momentum for a citywide or extra-local network or movement. Therefore, what distinguishes builders from master builders in the context of this article is the fact that builders have a more limited scope of building as opposed to the master builder, who creates a movement way beyond the local context.

While builders can create systems, master builders can create systems that spawn other systems, subsystems and movements. In my opinion, this builder emblem is the category most successful church planters, nonprofit leaders and workplace leaders fall into.

While builders are gifted leaders in that they are able to create (as a typical architect) a blueprint for a building, it is usually for a house rather than an apartment complex with hundreds of families.

Thought Leaders

Thought leaders are the thinkers, scholars, theologians and communicators of information who have the gift of conveying their ideas in such a way as to be a prophetic voice and a trendsetter.

Because of their unique assignment, most of their time is

focused in research, serious study, giving lectures and getting their content out in the form of books and all forms of social media. While they have great ability to influence the thinking of thousands (or millions) of people, they do not have the capacity (nor the divine assignment) to build anything more than a teaching platform.

Their greatest burden is to receive insight from information and serious study and to present it to as many people as possible. In other words, they are their happiest when they are giving a talk or preaching at a large or influential conference of leaders, finishing a cutting-edge book or communicating their thoughts before thousands of people via social media. (While those called to be master builders and builders would be frustrated if all they did is distill information and speak at conferences, the thought leader was born for this.)

Thought leaders can still have a huge impact—especially if within their audience are builders and master builders who understand how to put their ideas into practice and implement a strategic plan for movement. Thought leaders can sometimes feel discouraged and or frustrated when they hear the criticism of others who tell them they never built anything. What others fail to understand is that these thought leaders would not be as effective if they had to focus on building an entity or movement because building would require administrative or managerial responsibilities that would take much of their time and focus away from contemplation, prayer and study, greatly dissipating their ability to stay on the cutting edge of prophetic ideas.

Whenever I see a thought-leader type of person placed in an administrative role—or attempt to build a network—I know it is only going to last a short time or never materialize, because they are mimicking builders when their primary focus should be blessing.

A great biblical example of a great communicator who was not a builder was Apollos who (as shown in Acts 18:24-28) came to the city of Ephesus to preach and teach, and won several disciples to Christ. However, it wasn't until Paul came to Ephesus and found disciples (probably the same disciples Apollos won to Christ) that a church was planted, and a gospel movement was launched that shook all of Asia Minor (see Acts 19:1-23).

Paul said it best when he told the Corinthians "I have planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase" (1 Cor. 3:6). Here Paul wisely shares the importance of making room for both teachers and builders. Also, in the first testament, we can see how Ezra was the primary teacher and Nehemiah the master builder when it came to the restoration of Jerusalem (see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah).

In conclusion, we should never undervalue the significance of the thought leader who communicates the Word, whether it be via book, social media or in person. Paul even said God manifested His Word through preaching that was entrusted unto him (Titus 1:3).

We should also begin to recognize the extraordinary function and significance of the master builder, a function not often spoken about but one that is desperately needed if we are going to not only proclaim the gospel but create gospel movements.