

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF REINHARD BONNKE'S CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP PARADIGM

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Abstract

The study of leadership has evolved over the years, focusing on different approaches. In the early nineteenth century, leadership study focused on the traits, skills, and behavioral and situational approaches of leaders. In recent years the focus has emphasized servant leadership, authenticity, and charisma. This article focuses on the charismatic leadership theory propounded by Max Weber. This article aims at analyzing the charismatic leadership style of evangelist Reinhard Bonnke. The article starts with a definition of leadership followed by an overview of charismatic leadership and then delves into the life of Bonnke with a biographical sketch of his life. The article brings to light Bonnke's influence, contributions to the Spirit-empowered Movement, and leadership style. It concludes with a summative assessment of this leadership paradigm.

Introduction

Leadership is a subject that has dominated the conversations of people from all cultures. There are perhaps as many definitions of leadership as there are schools of thought on the subject. Peter Northouse, in his book *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, defines leadership as a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.¹ Leadership, therefore, involves influence. It entails influencing people towards a specific goal. This general definition of leadership needs to be differentiated from spiritual leadership. While leadership in general entails moving people toward a goal, spiritual leadership entails moving people towards God's agenda.² Spiritual leadership is perceived as being inspired by charismata (1 Cor 12; Eph 4:11–14).

The word "charisma" was first used to describe a special gift that certain individuals possess that gives them the capacity to do extraordinary things. Weber provided the most well-known definition of charisma as an extraordinary personality characteristic that gives a

person superhuman or exceptional powers and is reserved for a few, is of divine origin, and results in the person being treated as a leader.³ Northouse observes, “Charismatic leadership reflects the ability to inspire, to motivate, and to expect high performance from others based on strongly held core values.”⁴ Some of the main attributes of this kind of leadership include being visionary, inspirational, self-sacrificing, trustworthy, decisive, and performance-oriented.⁵

Overview of Charismatic Leadership

Charismatic leadership derives its authority from charisma. In this leadership style, the bearer is always an individual leader whose charismatic qualities have been acknowledged as authentic by the followers.⁶ Weber observes further that in charismatic leadership, consent to lead is not sourced democratically and does not express the “will” of the followers, but rather their obligation to follow.⁷

In his lead article, Eric Newberg has identified five styles of charismatic leadership based on Weber’s analysis of charismatic leadership. We shall briefly mention them here to provide the framework for this discussion. The first paradigm Newberg identifies is the *apostolic paradigm*. This paradigm is premised on the belief that the apostolic gift is in operation in the body of Christ worldwide till the church reaches maturity (Eph 4:11–13). The role of the apostles is to “plant churches, oversee and strengthen churches, develop leaders, ordain elders and deacons, supervise and coordinate ministries, manage crises, and network with other leaders and their ministries.”

The second paradigm is the *prophetic paradigm*. Prophets speak the mind of God, imparting divine counsel and wisdom to God’s people. These prophets should be accountable to the apostles while working alongside them to carry out the movement’s mission. The third paradigm is the *healing evangelist* paradigm. This paradigm is an expression of the Pentecostal conception of the full gospel. The Pentecostal gospel entails a proclamation of the message, the kerygma, and the demonstration of the Spirit’s power in healing, deliverance, and working of miracles. The manifestation of the Spirit’s power through the preaching of the gospel serves to draw unbelievers to Christ.

The fourth paradigm is the *pastorpreneur*. The pastorpreneur, as Newberg observes, combines traditional functions of the pastoral office with entrepreneurial savvy and business acumen. The rise of the megachurch concept has occasioned this paradigm. Megachurches have redefined the traditional role of a pastor from that of a shepherd to that of an entrepreneur. The last paradigm is the *teacher/scholar* paradigm. This paradigm consists of two distinct approaches, the pragmatic teacher/scholar and the academic teacher/scholar.⁸

Reinhard Bonnke fits within the healing evangelist paradigm of charismatic leadership. His theological propositions always point to one locus, the urgent need to

spread the gospel.⁹ His ministry was characterized by claims of divine healing, deliverance, miracles, and salvation decisions.¹⁰ Vinson Synan, the renowned church historian who attended Bonnke's Harare crusade, authenticates these claims: "I saw the greatest miracles I have ever seen, blind people received sight; people walked out of wheelchairs. Everybody goes to the Bonnke crusades—Catholics, Muslims, people from all religions, and those with no religion."¹¹ Healing evangelists combine both evangelism and healing as key aspects of the full gospel.

Bonnke's theology and leadership style were shaped by his life experiences. A sketch of his biography is necessary here to give us a perspective on this charismatic leader's motivations and accomplishments.

Bonnke's Background

Reinhard Bonnke was born in Königsberg, West Germany, on April 19, 1940, into a family influenced by Pentecostalism. His grandfather is said to have been healed of rheumatism by a Pentecostal preacher and consequently won into Pentecostalism. His father, Herman Bonnke, served in the army during World War II before fully devoting himself to pastoral ministry after the war. The war separated his family. His father was taken as a prisoner of war by the British, while his mother and his siblings fled to Denmark. The family was later reunited after several years.

Reinhard Bonnke's mother, Meta Scheffler, had a profound spiritual influence on Bonnke's life during his early years. On his tenth birthday, a missionary visited his local church and talked about his work in foreign lands. Bonnke was profoundly impressed and heard another voice in his heart telling him he would preach the gospel in Africa one day.¹² Towards the end of 1951, Pfarer Kukula, a Finnish Pentecostal minister known for helping people to be baptized in the Holy Spirit, came to Bonnke's local church. During his preaching, Kukula explained the truth about Spirit baptism, and what followed was life-changing. Bonnke observes, "We had hardly knelt when the power of God began to pour into and over me. Joy unspeakable filled my heart, and I began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave me utterance."¹³

When Bonnke turned 14 years old, he joined his father every Sunday and attended the services in Krempa. It is here where another life-changing experience happened. Reinhard Bonnke was attending one of the services when he began to sense a strong urge to lay hands on a woman in the church sitting in the opposite row. He laid hands on her, and she got healed instantly.

When Reinhard Bonnke was 17 years old, he had a vision in which he saw Johannesburg marked on a map of Africa. He interpreted this vision to mean God was calling him to be a missionary to Africa. Bonnke took a two-year Bible school training course in Wales to prepare for his ministry. During this period, he had to trust God for

finances. After training in England, Bonnke returned to Germany in 1961, where he worked as an evangelist in northern Germany. Later he married Anni Sulzle, who was a choir director. The couple built up a congregation in Flensburg, a town bordering Denmark.

The call to Africa finally materialized in 1967 when he was commissioned by the Velberter Mission and sent to South Africa. There Bonnke was attached as a preacher to the Apostolic Faith Mission. Soon, however, Bonnke realized that the preacher he was supposed to work with was deeply influenced by apartheid and could not shake hands with his African brethren. This incident deeply shocked him. Later he sought permission to move to Lesotho with his family and begin his mission work there. In Lesotho, Bonnke preached at the bus station and gradually built up a congregation of fifty members. He also started a Bible correspondence course that attracted 50,000 enrollments. He also built up his small printing press, which printed an evangelistic magazine. These materials were distributed by cycling evangelists who sold them throughout Lesotho.

While in Maseru, the capital of Lesotho, Bonnke had a life-changing dream. One night he dreamed of seeing a map of Africa, and as he watched, he saw it being washed in red blood. The Holy Spirit told him that it was the blood of Jesus and whispered into his ear, "Africa shall be saved." As a result of this dream, Bonnke soon had to make radical decisions regarding his ministry in Lesotho and South Africa. His ambitious plans saw him break ties with the Velberter Mission and establish Christ for All Nations (CfaN). He launched his major evangelistic campaigns in large auditoriums and football stadiums. His impact and influence soon grew as he attracted huge crowds to his meetings. Soon the presidents and the poor of Africa became part of the audience in his evangelistic campaigns with claims of mighty manifestations of the Spirit.

Bonke's Accomplishments

Spiritual leaders, in a way, function within a paradox, for God calls them to do something only he can do.¹⁴ Spiritual leaders cannot produce a spiritual change in people. It is the Spirit of God who works through these leaders to bring about spiritual transformation in people's lives. Bonnke has been described as the man who changed the face of Christianity in Africa.¹⁵ The raw statistics from CfaN indicate that during his nearly five decades of ministry in Africa, he led an estimated 80 million people to Christ. His crusades witnessed some of the largest gatherings ever witnessed in the continent of Africa. For instance, during his six-day crusade in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, CfaN claimed that over 1 million people signed the decision cards.¹⁶

Bonke was a team player who partnered well with the local African churches to evangelize the continent. In every town where he held his campaigns, the local churches

came together to host him regardless of their denominational affiliation. Bonnke comments, “When it comes to the great and prior interest of evangelism, I work with people of many different spiritual affirmations. CfaN is an evangelist-servant to the churches wherever they labor and whatever their witness or emphasis.”¹⁷ Paul Gifford observes that “there is no doubt that a Bonnke crusade brings about enormous grassroots participation.”¹⁸ Such mobilization promoted ecumenical cooperation and reduced competition among the local pastors.

Bonnke promoted methods of mass evangelism designed to reach as many people as possible for Christ. Some of his methods have been adopted widely by many local evangelists and churches in their evangelistic activities. Crusade banners and posters are used to advertise evangelistic meetings. These evangelistic rallies essentially take the format of the Bonnke crusades. The ward-up or praise and worship session is followed by preaching and, finally, an “altar call” for salvation and prayer for personal needs. Bonnke’s books, particularly the new believers booklet *Now That You Are Saved*, have been used widely in local churches as a discipleship tool for new converts.

Bonnke was a very focused evangelist who also influenced the church in Africa to prioritize this divine task. Bill Wilson described him as “the greatest evangelist in the history of the Christian Church.”¹⁹

Bonnke wrote many inspirational books, mainly addressing the subjects of faith, salvation, and healing. These books have been widely circulated and have continued to influence many people’s lives after his death.

Bonnke’s Influence

Reinhard Bonnke had an enormous influence on the continent of Africa. He probably rivalled Billy Graham, but he did not get as much attention as the latter because his ministry was centered in Africa and not the US.²⁰ Bonnke spoke both to the poor and the presidents of Africa. In his first visit to Kenya in 1988, the then President, Daniel Moi, ordered the state-owned national television, Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC), to broadcast his crusade at Uhuru Park, the venue of the crusade. Its subsidiary radio station, KBC Radio, also aired the rally for those who could not access the TV broadcast. While it would be difficult to estimate how many people were reached with any degree of accuracy, one can say that millions watched this live service broadcasted on national TV and radio stations. President Moi himself attended with several of his cabinet ministers. It is reported that two cabinet ministers responded to the altar call for salvation. Leonard Khafafa, a local columnist, observes that Bonnke wielded tremendous soft power, which he used to improve humanity and advance Christianity.²¹ The Nigerian President described Bonnke’s death as a great loss to Nigeria in his tribute.²²

Bonnke's influence extended to the leadership of the Spirit-empowered Movement. Jack Hayford described him as "the most far-reaching, most dynamically penetrating international evangelist in the world."²³ We shall now discuss his contribution to this global movement.

Contribution to the Spirit-empowered Movement

Reinard Bonnke contributed to the Spirit-empowered Movement in very significant ways. Bonnke directly influenced the Pentecostalization of the African continent through mass Spirit baptism. In his rallies, Bonnke emphasized the baptism of the Holy Spirit and prayed for people to be filled with the Holy Spirit. As Daniel King has observed, when Bonnke prayed for people to be filled with the Spirit, "Suddenly, everyone in the stadium began to speak in tongues. It sounded like a mighty rushing wind as thousands of people lifted their voices in a heavenly language."²⁴ Such an outpouring of the Spirit changed the contours of Christianity in Africa.

Reinhard Bonnke also reminds us that miracles, signs, and wonders have their unique place in global missions. The miraculous manifestations in the form of healing and deliverance serve to witness to the world the uniqueness of Christ. These miracles draw people to Christ. Vinson Synan, commenting on the impact of miraculous manifestations in Bonnke's campaigns, observes, "Blind people received sight, people walked out of wheelchairs. Everybody goes to the Bonnke crusades—Catholics, Muslims, people from all religions, and those with no religion. There is nothing quite like that in the history of evangelism."²⁵ When the gospel is shared with the demonstrations of the Spirit's power, many people often take a step of faith toward Christ.²⁶ Bonnke used the claims of the Spirit's manifestation in signs and wonders to promote his evangelistic campaigns.

Leadership Style

Leadership styles and values vary from culture to culture. Africa is a collectivist society. In this society, relationships are highly cherished and nurtured. An effective leader in this context is one who is perceived as caring, inspirational, collaborative, and not excessively self-centered.²⁷ Leaders who act autonomously in sub-Saharan Africa are seen as ineffective.²⁸

Bonnke was an authentic, charismatic leader who invested in building relationships and networks across the continent and the denominational divide to achieve his vision of the salvation of Africa. He was concerned with the collective good of Africans, and his leadership style can therefore be viewed in one sense as a socialized charismatic leadership.

Socialized charismatic leaders transcend their interests for the sake of others.²⁹ Bonnke transcended his interests to pursue the vision of evangelizing Africa. In another sense, Bonnke's leadership can also be viewed as being revolutionary. Max Weber observes that a charismatic leader is always in some sense a "revolutionary, setting himself in conscious opposition to some established aspects of the society in which he works."³⁰ He went against the established order in the Apostolic Faith Mission, where he was initially posted, due to some apartheid behavior of the leader with whom he was supposed to work. Later on, Bonnke broke away from this mission to establish CfaN, propelling him to the global limelight regarding evangelizing Africa.

Bonnke was an empowering leader. Whenever he held his evangelistic crusade, the morning sessions usually focused on equipping the local ministers to be effective evangelists. Perhaps the most significant conference to address the need for equipping ministers was the Harare Fire conference held in the new Harare Conference Centre from 21–27 April 1996. This conference brought together 4,000 African evangelists from sixty countries. The conference aimed to draw together Africa's leading evangelists to devise a "common strategy to evangelize the great continent."³¹ This conference drew speakers from the US and Africa and covered topics focusing on evangelism and divine healing, Christian education, intercession, church planting, marriage counselling, etc.

Unlike some of his predecessors, Bonnke, as a missionary, did not have a condescending attitude towards Africans. He was a relational leader who genuinely loved Africans. As observed above, Bonnke defied the apartheid regime and associated himself with his African brothers and sisters in Christ. Bonnke viewed Africans as co-workers in the task of evangelizing Africa. He involved them in planning his meetings, giving them a sense of ownership. Robert MacManus and Gama Perrucci observe, "Traditional African followers expect to actively participate in the leadership process rather than simply being directed from the 'top.' Decisions are to be made collectively and in collaboration while building consensus."³² By building collaborative efforts with Africans, Bonnke won Africa's heart and soul.

Bonnke's Appeal

Vision for ministry has been defined as "having a clear mental image of a preferred future imparted by God to His chosen servants and based on an accurate understanding of God, self, and circumstances."³³ Reinhard Bonnke had a divinely imparted vision for the salvation of Africa, and he seems to have rightly understood his role in the fulfillment of this vision. His vision was inspirational, and his passion was contagious. Bonnke focused on this vision without detouring from start to finish. All his efforts, including innovative ways of evangelism, were aimed at realizing this vision. Bonnke's

sensitivity to and dependence on the Holy Spirit is remarkable. As a teenager, he sensed the call of God to be a missionary in Africa. He sacrificed a comfortable life in Germany and overcame all odds to come to Africa. The call took him to the southern tip of Africa, from where he envisioned the salvation of Africa.

Reinhard Bonnke lived a life of integrity and accountability. He avoided scandals that have plagued many charismatic leaders, particularly in Africa. He was accountable to a board that exercised oversight over his ministry. Bonnke also loved Africa. He came to stay when many of his contemporaries made stopovers in African cities. Nimi Wariboko captures this well: “Something that will strike you about Reinhard Bonnke and how he relates to Africa and how he works is that he believes in Africa, and he loves Africa.”³⁴ Africans loved him also and turned up in unprecedented numbers to hear him speak in his rallies.

Lessons for the Spirit-empowered Movement

The Spirit-empowered Movement has had global success unparalleled in the history of global movements. From Azusa Street and other spontaneous outpourings of the Spirit independent of Azusa’s influence, this movement has changed the face of global Christianity. However, the movement now faces the real challenge of modernity. Besides modernity, there is also a phenomenal advancement in social sciences and humanities, which has given us valuable insights into human behavior and interactions. These advancements are of great value in missional studies. The lesson here is that the Spirit-empowered Movement needs to leverage these insights but at the same time maintain its pneumatic emphasis if it is going to keep the streams of revival flowing in the Global South. Means and methods will not solve the problem of the heart. It is only the Spirit of God who can bring spiritual regeneration and liberation.

The second lesson from Bonnke’s success is the need for an ecumenical approach to evangelism. The Spirit-empowered Movement must not rest on its laurels but seek meaningful partnerships across denominational barriers to carrying on with the divine task of fulfilling the Great Commission. Bonnke transcended denominational boundaries to embrace all Christians in winning Africa for Christ. Bonnke had a winning way of working with the local churches. He would bring together churches that would not normally come together in the mission. Gifford observes, for instance, that of the churches involved in the Nairobi crusade, there were at least fourteen Anglican churches.³⁵

The third lesson touches on leadership transition. Leaders must transition other leaders into their work in order to maintain continuity and effectiveness.³⁶ Perhaps the weakest link in the Spirit-empowered Movement is leadership transitions. Some leaders within this movement are more like the baobab tree in the African Savannah-Woodland

ecosystem. The giant tree suppresses all other vegetation around it to appear dominant. These leaders do not mentor other leaders, and in some cases, they suppress the spiritual gifts of others around them. In the event of their demise, their ministries are often plunged into a leadership crisis. Reinhard Bonnke identified his successor in the person of Daniel Kolenda and groomed him for succession nine years before his death. CfaN ministry continues under the leadership of this young evangelist. In Kenya, Bonnke raised evangelist Teresia Wairimu, who became an evangelist of national and international repute. Her meetings at Uhuru Park attracted crowds as large as Bonnke's earlier meetings.³⁷ Hundreds of people responded to the alter call in one of her meetings that Bonnke attended incognito. There were also claims of manifestations of miraculous healing in this gathering.³⁸ These two examples demonstrate how Bonnke multiplied himself and also prepared for transitions.

The fourth lesson is on the place of evangelism in the local church. Evangelism is key to the future growth of the Spirit-empowered Movement. Any movement that does not propagate itself is only a generation away from extinction. Bonnke was at the forefront of evangelistic campaigns across Africa. He challenged church leaders in the continent to focus also on evangelism. He writes, "Evangelism should be the thinking, the impetus behind every agenda if we want a church that is alive. When church boards downplay evangelism, how can they keep the church from stagnation and sterility?"³⁹ The Spirit-empowered Movement must carry on with the task of evangelism to maintain its spiritual vitality.

Critique of Bonnke

Financial integrity has been the waterloo of many charismatic leaders. Most of these ministries were founded by a charismatic leader who built them from scratch to heights of success. As the ministry grows, the leaders do not sometimes grow with it by setting up accountability systems. This often leads to abuse of church resources. The ministry resources are not often differentiated from personal resources leading to a situation where the ministry is run like a personal enterprise. Bonnke, however, set up a board that was responsible for the operations of his ministry. Although he was not always in agreement with the board concerning the ministry's strategic direction, the board was useful in holding him accountable. CfaN did not nevertheless make public its sources of income nor declare how much came in annually. It is notable, though, that Reinhard Bonnke disclosed that his annual operating budget stood at \$2.5 million in an interview with *The New York Times*.⁴⁰

Reinhard Bonnke has been criticized for his anti-intellectualism stand. Gifford observes that Bonnke regularly tells stories at the expense of "educated people."⁴¹ Bonnke writes, "The Bible puts me through! I am getting through to the throne of God! Alleluia! Experience is all! Don't listen to your head; listen to your heart."⁴²

Bonnke's position here is typical of the Pentecostal attitude towards intellectualism. Early Pentecostals did not put a premium on intellectual development, as noted by Newberg in his lead article. This position has changed with the emergence of Pentecostal scholarship and the establishment of seminaries such as Oral Roberts University and Regent University. Through association with Vinson Synan, Bonnke seems to have undergone some conversion. Synan helped him to see the need to document the number of conversions in his ministry.⁴³ Bonnke later acknowledged that Synan helped him see the "bigger picture" of God's doing in the Charismatic Movement.⁴⁴

Healing is one of the key features of Reinhard Bonnke's crusades across the continent of Africa. His evangelistic crusades often end with a session of praying for the sick to recover. Divine healing is the primary attraction of Pentecostalism worldwide, and consequently, Pentecostalism can be referred to as a healing religion.⁴⁵ Divine healing has addressed existential spiritual needs in African cosmology, contributing to its rapid growth. The manifestation of the Spirit's power portrays Jesus as the most powerful healer, one who can win a competition with the gods of traditional religions through a display of superior healing power.⁴⁶ While divine healing has met felt needs and drawn many people to Christianity, it has been overemphasized at the expense of the sovereignty of God. Yes, the God who saves is also concerned about the well-being of individuals, but he also uses pain, hardships, and even sickness sometimes to deepen our faith. The Apostle Paul, for instance, despite operating in the charisma of healing, had a thorn in the flesh (probably an ailment), which taught him to stay humble and dependent on the grace of God (2 Cor 12:7–10).

Summative Assessment

Jan Willen observes, "Charisma is, by definition, unstable."⁴⁷ The hero wins his authority by personal power and as soon as the power fades the hero also fades.⁴⁸ This challenge is more applicable to the healing evangelist paradigm, especially during the time of transition. Many healing evangelists do not prepare well for the continuity of their ministries, and in the event of their demise, their ministries are plunged into crisis. It is, therefore, necessary for the healing evangelist to build an egalitarian value system in his followers to safeguard his charisma.⁴⁹

Another challenge of the healing evangelist leadership paradigm is pride. Oswald Sanders observes that "personality cults have often developed around great spiritual leaders."⁵⁰ While this danger faces all spiritual leaders, it is perhaps more likely among the healing evangelist paradigm. This is so because of the healing charisma that tends to make them very popular. The working of miracles has tended to attract a lot of attention even from biblical times. Many people followed Christ for his miracles and

not necessarily because they believed in him (John 6:26). This popularity, if not mingled with humility, can often lead to destructive behaviors such as pride and cultic personalities.

Healing evangelists have another challenge—accountability. A number of these leaders run their ministries without effective accountability structures. This makes them very susceptible to manipulating people and distortion of Scripture for personal gain. Some of them have anti-intellectual tendencies because of their charisma. They do not consider seminary training beneficial as they claim to be already “anointed” for ministry. Without a firm biblical foundation, such excesses are inevitable.

Healing evangelists, therefore, should work under some accountability system in local churches or under effective boards that can hold them accountable for their teachings and lifestyles. These safeguards will keep the leaders accountable and provide for the longevity of their organizations.



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**“In our own
tongues”**

**Amplifying
Pentecostalism’s
Minoritized
Voices**

52nd Annual Meeting of

**Society for
Pentecostal Studies**

Hosted by

Oral Roberts University

**MARCH
16-19, 2023**

The 2023 conference theme aims at amplifying Pentecostalism’s minoritized voices by creating space to recover, retell, and reflect on their stories, theologies, and practices.

The Annual Meeting provides the opportunity for professionals involved in Pentecostalism to share knowledge and new directions in research and practice. Approximately 300 program sessions are convened during the three-day meeting held every spring to provide participation venues and networking outlets for Pentecostal educators and scholars.

For further information, contact us:

www.sps-usa.org