

The Leader in Leadership: Issues of Spirituality, Authority and Stewardship¹

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INTRODUCTION

One of the pressing issues facing pastoral ministry today has to do with the definition of who a pastor is, and what he or she is supposed to do, particularly the kind of leadership expected from him or her. Is the pastor a spiritual leader and director? an entrepreneurial and charismatic leader who stands at the vanguard of a well-oiled organization? a choreographer of social and community activities? a theologian and biblical teacher? or a shepherd of souls? Not only are these questions of direct interest to pastors, they seem to have exercised concerned members in our churches as well.

Gone are the days when the pastor is (or at least perceived to be) the most educated or informed person in the congregation, and gone are the days when members are acquiescent. The situation is somewhat different today. Many in our churches are highly successful both professionally and academically, and they are not averse to speaking up and making demands. Immersed as many church members are in the corporate world, it is not surprising that some would bring to the discussion of pastoral function insights and expectations of leadership culled from the marketplace. This, plus greater exposure to ministry expressions from across the spectrum of ecclesiastical traditions, translates into greater expectations placed on pastors and leaders of churches to meet up to standards of performance which may or may not be what Christian ministry is all about.

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What then are Christian leaders called to be and do, and how does one measure pastoral or leadership effectiveness? The answers depend largely on the criteria one operates with. Unfortunately, the performance aspect of leadership very often dominates the discussion, particularly as this relates to the growing, managing, and organizing of the church, so much so that leadership effectiveness tends to be evaluated solely on the basis of what a leader *does* in an organization, with little or no attention given to the *person* of the Christian leader.

In what follows, we shall argue, firstly, that the person of the Christian leader is integral to the exercise of Christian leadership, and that care must be taken to guard the heart, for it serves as an anchor and ballast for the practice of leadership. Secondly, we take up the issue of the pastor's self-image, specifically the question of spiritual authority. What does 'anointed' leadership mean? What is the nature of spiritual authority and what paradigm should be operative in leadership? Thirdly and finally, we will look at Christian leadership from the perspective of the stewardship of truth. All these considerations converge on the *person* of the leader.

I. SPIRITUALITY: TENDING THE HEART OF THE LEADER

A. Character and the Christian Leader

There are certain types of leadership where the performance of the leader is not contingent on his or her being virtuous and a person of good character. A commander in the battlefield does not need to be honest and nice to be deadly effective. A violinist can make pretty music in the concert hall and be downright ugly in the way she treats people on the streets. A mechanic can be an aggressive bully and still be thoroughly competent in what he does in the workshop. Their ability to perform is, in one sense, not dependent on their being good people.

Not so in Christian leadership. In *Christian* leadership, the character of the leader is inseparable from the *exercise* of leadership. If every Christian disciple is to grow spiritually into Christlikeness, then it is doubly necessary for those whose duty it is to lead fellow believers into greater Christlikeness. What we do as leaders is rooted in, and deeply affected by, who we are as Christians. We cannot be

insensitively patronizing, obnoxiously haughty, or ill mannered and ill tempered as people, and not be ultimately compromised as pastors and Christian leaders. Putting on a pious persona just so we can persuade others in church that we are leaders will only bring us so far. The truth will eventually catch up with our masquerade.

The scriptural principle stands: “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure” (Mt 12:34-35). Since much of what pastors and leaders do involves the intersecting of their lives with those under their charge, character comes into play, for much hangs on the authenticity of their profession. If the heart of the leader is “good,” then from it will proceed “good things.” But if it were a treasure house of evil, then the ministry arising from that will be infected. It is therefore imperative that leaders guard their hearts with vigilance.

In underscoring the need to guard the heart, we are by no means saying that a good heart is all a leader needs. There is a *competency* dimension to leadership that must accompany a great character. Leadership is about doing something right and doing the right thing (competence), not just about being a good person. Yet having said that, is it not true that when leaders fail and fall, more often than not it is a result of a character flaw rather than a lack of competence?

In Paul’s listing of the characteristics required of church leaders in the Pastoral Epistles, the focus is primarily on character. Very little is said about skills, abilities, knowledge, or even gifts. Not that these are unimportant; they are. Knowledge of doctrine, for instance, is presupposed in the injunction to “exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Tit 1:9; cf. Prov 19:2). Yet the overriding concern is for the character of the leader. The leader must exhibit an exemplary spirituality and a reputation that is without reproach in the eyes of everyone (1 Tim 3:2 and Tit 1:6a).

B. Why spirituality is critical to leadership

Why is the character of the leader so critical to leadership? How does genuine spirituality impact leadership? There are at least 4 reasons why

the spiritual condition of the leader's heart is critical to the ministry of leadership:

1. *It orientates us to the yardstick of true success in ministry and leadership.* What constitutes leadership success depend on the criteria one uses. If having a multi-million dollar budget, a gigantic sanctuary and a large membership were seen as benchmarks of ministry success, then the leader or congregation without these would by definition be less than successful. Or if the measure of effectiveness is rhetorical prowess or philosophical sophistication, then the person without these qualities is perceived to be not only unimpressive but also unsuccessful. Wasn't this the charge levied against the apostle Paul by his opponents at Corinth? By their standard of flamboyant spirituality rooted in the rhetoric of Greek wisdom, Paul just did not measure up.

In contrast to their theology of glory, Paul looked to the cross of Christ as the paradigm and yardstick for his ministry. He develops a theology of the cross as the true wisdom of God in the first two chapters of 1 Corinthians. Ministry success for the apostle does not consist in conformity to the received wisdom of this world, but in conformity to the way of the cross. He exemplifies the counter-cultural spirit of resistance that rejects the worldly standards of success and opts instead to measure one's life and work by the standards of God.

At a time when Christian leadership is increasingly judged by external markers, when pastors are invited to pattern their ministry after visions of organizational success that the world deem desirable, it is important that our criteria are God-defined and rooted in Scripture. Leadership in Christian ministry is a spiritual undertaking that must be evaluated *ultimately* by a spiritual yardstick. And only a heart sensitized to the teachings, priorities, and values of God and Scripture is able to discern and differentiate between criteria of leadership success. Only the truly spiritual leader can go on when staying the course and remaining faithful does not seem to translate readily into outward signs of success.

2. *It sharpens the leader's vision and charts direction for her and those she leads.* The first task of leadership according to Max DePree is to "define reality." And there is no clearer view of reality than that offered by the altogether Real One. Spiritual sensitivity enables leaders to discern what

it is that the Lord, their Leader, would have them do. In this, the work of Christian leadership is not unlike that of the biblical prophets. Before the prophets can say, “Thus saith the Lord,” they must first be spoken to. They must first hear a word *from* God before they speak a word *for* God. The word of the preacher, as Eugene Peterson observes, is always a “second word;” it is ever an *echo* of God’s Word.

Similarly, Christian leaders lead as they follow the leading of the Lord. Leadership is thus grounded in discipleship. Discerning how the purposes of God may be worked out in specific situations, i.e., vision, comes to those who are in a vital relationship with the Lord, while steering the company of the led in the right direction requires knowing where we are supposed to be going, and what is the best way forward. On both counts, being spiritually in touch with the Lord our Leader is absolutely necessary.

Furthermore, there are temptations and distractions that threaten to derail the leader. Deuteronomy 17:16-17 stipulates that the king in Israel must not multiply horses, silver and gold, and wives. These temptations have their modern counterparts in the cravings for *power*, *money* and *sex* that together form the trinity of temptations that come to all in leadership. Our susceptibility to what Calvin Miller calls “the slavery of our own centrality” means that the heart must be guarded to ensure that we are kept on the right track. The possibility of leadership derailment is a real and constant threat that cannot be taken lightly. This makes keeping the leader’s heart alive in God and attuned to the Spirit all the more urgent.

3. *It provides a stable basis for a secure sense of the self.* Insecure people make bad leaders because they are threatened by those more competent than they. Leaders with fragile or inflated ego are so self-absorbed that they have little or no regard for either colleagues or subordinates. They are not going to allow those under their charge to blossom or develop for fear that they might steal their thunder and overshadow them. Sometimes, a fragile ego is manifested in a defensive stance and an overbearing authoritarian style of leadership that steamrolls over others.

Only when one rests on the unconditional love and acceptance of God does one have a secure basis for the self. When leaders see themselves from the standpoint of God, whose love for them is not

contingent on either their performance or their goodness, they are freed up to look beyond themselves to the needs of others. Followers are then treated as individuals with unique gifts that can be cultivated for the Kingdom rather than as means to their own ends. And such a secure image of the self comes only to those whose hearts are tuned to the movements of the Spirit of God.

This grounding in the love and acceptance of God is all the more needed when in the course of serving leaders are attacked and criticized, often unjustly and viciously. Anyone acquainted with ecclesiastical backbiting and conflicts between believers can testify that church folks are fully capable of vituperative personal attacks. Let no one underestimate the psychological, emotional and relational fallout from church fights. And leaders are not exempted from such personal attacks. When these happen, it is important that their sense of worth be derived from the Lord and not merely on the basis of their positions or the approval of people. This leads naturally to our fourth and final reason why the leader's spirituality is critical to his or her exercise of leadership.

4. Leadership durability comes out of a spiritual center that is rooted in fidelity to Scripture. A God-centered spirituality sustains, nourishes, and energizes the soul of the leader so that he or she is motivated and strengthened to continue leading over the long haul. The work of ministry is demanding and the challenges daunting. God's people are not easy to lead – remember Moses and the hard time the runaway Hebrew slaves gave him? Spiritual fruits do not come by easily. And there are obstacles aplenty, not to mention diabolical opposition that are not flesh and blood. Given these conditions, it is easy for the leader to be discouraged and to throw in the towel. Pastoral ministry is draining, and unless one's inner resources are constantly renewed and regularly replenished in relationship with God, the pastor-leader will not be able to serve and lead over the long haul. Only those who operate from a spiritual center of vital communion with God will have the requisite spiritual stamina to keep going on.

A spiritually invigorating relationship with God must at the same time be biblically informed. It is not enough to be sustained in ministry; one must be sustained on the right path. And it is here that adherence to the basics of ministry as these are given in Scripture serves as ballast

in the midst of constantly evolving fads and fashions in ministry and leadership. There will always be new fanged proposals on how to lead a congregation or novel ways to do ministry, but there are some basic ingredients in a biblically faithful ministry that cannot be compromised, and must be present. As the heart is properly tuned to God, the leader is conditioned by the Spirit of God to focus on the basics, and in so doing, stay the course.

These then are the four main reasons why the spiritual vitality of the leader is indispensable to his or her leadership: it provides the proper yardstick by which leaders measure their effectiveness; it sharpens leadership vision and charts direction for both leaders and followers; it provides a stable basis for a secure sense of the self; and finally, it enables leaders to lead over the long haul. In all these, who the leader is, namely her character and spiritual maturity, is integral to what the leader does. Jack Hayford's observations about "The Character of a Leader" are instructive:

The depth and height of success in the personal life of a leader...centers in a private venue: the heart. The true measure of a leader is in diametric opposition to his being controlled by techniques or methods, by slogans or statements, or by visible evidences of success, acceptance or recognition. Further, the criterion of a leader's ultimate measurement comes from a plane higher than human origin. The character of a true leader requires an answer to a call that sounds from the *highest* source and shapes him in the *deepest*, most personal corners of his soul. "Success" at these levels—at the highest and deepest—will only be realized as a leader commits to an inner accountability to faithfully, constantly and honestly answer one question: *Am I maintaining "integrity of heart"?*²

This integrity of heart or Christlikeness is cultivated over time, and it comes out of the leader's submissiveness to the transforming work of the Spirit. The leader has no greater ally in the exercise of leadership than the authority of a holy life.

² Jack Hayford, "The Character of a Leader," in George Barna, ed. *Leaders on Leadership* (Ventura: Gospel Light Publications, 1998), p 68.

II. THE QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP AUTHORITY

A. The notion of “anointed” leadership

In certain quarters of Christianity, authority in the Christian community – whether within a local church or a ministry organization – rests primarily in a single person who has been designated the principal leader by virtue of his or her being specially ‘anointed’ by God. This anointment entails being set apart by the Spirit so that the leader becomes the unquestioned mediator of the divine will to the group. The word of the ‘anointed’ leader is regarded and received as the Lord’s own word. It is binding on all followers, and must be obeyed implicitly and totally. This model of leadership is highly hierarchical, with the leader’s authority resting in a special anointment by God.

Passages often cited in support of this notion of anointed leadership include 1 Samuel 24:6, where David, presented with the opportunity to take Saul’s life, reminded his men: “The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD’S anointed, to raise my hand against him; for he is the LORD’S anointed.” On another occasion, David chided Abishai, the commander of his elite warriors, when he wanted to take Saul’s life: “Do not destroy him; for who can raise his hand against the LORD’S anointed, and be guiltless?” (1 Sam 26:9; also 26:23). It is argued that Saul cannot be harmed because he had been anointed or set apart by the Lord. To oppose him – and by extension, any other anointed leader – would be tantamount to opposing God himself.

In addition to the scriptural injunction not to oppose the Lord’s anointed, it has been suggested that church growth or ministry success depends on having compliant followers rallying around a strong and authoritative leader. Anecdotal evidence is often cited to show that when the leader is allowed to lead unhindered and unquestioned, results follow. To question the decisions of the anointed leader would only impede the work of the Spirit since he or she represents the will of God for the particular ministry.

Does being set aside by God as the principal leader in a church or ministry entail the idea of unquestioned allegiance? An examination of other passages of Scripture suggests otherwise. Instead of being above critique, those set apart as leaders are open to censure when they depart

from God's will. King Saul may have been anointed by the Lord (1 Sam 10:1), but when he went astray (13:8f), Samuel stepped forward with a word of indictment (13:11f). Saul did not enjoy immunity from prophetic censure even though he was Israel's divinely anointed leader. The same was true with David. Despite being a man after God's own heart, he was called to task by the prophet Nathan (2 Sam 12:1-12) for his duplicitous deeds. One can multiply examples from the history of Israel. When Israel's national leaders led God's people away from God's prescribed path, the prophets were invariably on hand to bring a word of rebuke and judgment. Even the prophets, God's anointed spokesmen, were not spared when they deviated from the word and will of the Lord.

Turning to the examples of leaders at work in the New Testament, one observes that they did not operate in such a way as to preclude accountability or reference to others in the body. Peter was undoubtedly looked upon as the leader of the post-Ascension apostolic band. Yet when it came time to choose a replacement for Judas, Peter did not unilaterally appoint a person. Instead he brought the matter up for consideration by his fellow apostles (Ac 1:15f). He sought their mind and a consensual decision was reached. Peter may have tabled the motion, but it was a group decision. Together, "they proposed two men: Joseph...and Matthias" (v 23) as candidates. Leadership decision-making here is more communal deliberation than unilateral pronouncement.

After his ministry to the household of the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10), Peter was called to task by the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem for going into the house of the uncircumcised and eating with Gentiles (Acts 11:1). Leaving aside the theological inadequacy that sparked their criticism, what is significant for our purposes is to note that Peter was not above query by his fellow believers. He had to explain himself (v 4), indicating that even the acknowledged leader of the embryonic church was not above accountability to the body. The people had to be persuaded; Peter did not insist on their being submissive to his authority.

A sense of camaraderie and communal decision-making characterizes the setting aside of the first missionaries (Acts 13:1f). In the account given to us, it was in the context of corporate worship, fasting and prayers that the Spirit led the church at Antioch to set aside

Barnabas and Saul. Once again, we note that the decision was not made unilaterally by a single leader, however senior or seasoned, but something arrived at corporately in the context of seeking the Lord's mind together.

One of the thorny issues that the apostle Paul had to deal with in his epistles concerned the question of apostolic authority. Yet when we examine his letters, we find a fair bit of argumentation and persuasion, particularly in the epistles to the Corinthians. While he can be forthright in asserting his apostolic authority (2 Cor 11:5, 22f), his approach was never to browbeat his followers for not being compliant. Rather, we find him going out of his way to bring about a realignment of the people to the truth; and he did this by presenting the truth in as persuasive a manner as possible so as to win the allegiance of his followers. Not for him the badgering tactic of commanding loyalty by a simple appeal to his being the 'anointed' leader.

There is a difference between a leader who is Kingdom and people-centered, and one whose ambition is the building of his or her own little empire. Paul was dedicated to the building up of believers in the Church of Christ rather than to raise up a following for himself. His own lifestyle with his churches was one marked by selfless service. Writing to the Thessalonians, Paul said: "you know what kind of people we proved to be among you *for your sake*" (1 Thess 1:5; cf. his considerateness for those he served in 1 Thess 2:8-9). And to the Corinthians, Paul wrote: "Now, even if I boast a little too much of *our authority*, which the Lord gave *for building you up* and not for tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it" (2 Cor 10:8; cf. 13:10).

The focus of authority is on the building up of the church. If anything else, the idea of 'anointed' leadership means seeking the welfare of others and building them up in the Lord through the giving of one's life rather than 'lording it over others.' Authority in Paul's leadership modus operandi is not about the people elevating the leader, but that the leader might serve the people.

How then should we understand those specific instructions that enjoin obedience to our leaders? "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you" (Heb 13:17). The verb translated "obey" is *peitho*, "to persuade," and the verbal form here is literally, "let yourself

be persuaded by” or “have confidence in.” In other words, we are to be biased towards being persuaded by our leaders, i.e., we are to give them the benefit of the doubt, but it does not mean obeying mindlessly. On the contrary, let the arguments and persuasive words of our leaders elicit from us our allegiance.

Furthermore, the verb “submit” is not the usual *hupotassomai*, i.e., placing oneself under another person in an organization, as it is used for instance in Rm 13:1, “subject to governing authorities” (other e.g., Tit 3:1; Col 3:18; 1 Pet 2:18). Rather the word is *hupеiko*, used only here in the NT, which does not so much carry the idea of submitting to a structure as yielding after a contest. It has the sense of a vigorous debate or exchange, at the end of which one party gives way. This coheres with the idea of being persuaded. Thus the idea of obeying our leaders should be understood in terms of the leader persuading their followers by the force of their arguments and truth-claims, rather than blind or unquestioning submission to the so-called ‘anointed’ leader.

The same idea of giving leaders the benefit of the doubt is discernible in 1 Tim 5:19-20, when the writer, after speaking about the need to honor elders and leaders, goes on to say that unless otherwise shown through “the evidence of two or three witnesses,” no accusation should be brought against an elder. In other words, leaders are to be highly regarded, and care must be taken to ensure that they are not wrongly maligned and accused. Nevertheless, there is no indication that the elder is above being investigated or rebuked. Nothing in the text suggests that “those who persist in sin” cannot be found among the ranks of the leadership. Leaders must be treated fairly and properly, but they are not above reproach and beyond critique.

The call not to “believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 Jn 4:1) is another scriptural guideline on the question of submission to anointed leadership. There will be people in any given Christian community whose ideas and teachings exercise influence over others, and it stands to reason that in many instances these people would be in positions of leadership. This being the case, it does not make sense that all ‘spirits’ and ideas are open to critique *except* those of the anointed leader. What if the leader were the unwitting conduit for less than biblical ideas? It is therefore incumbent on members of the congregation to ensure that the ideas and suggestions advocated by the leader are biblically sound.

In view of the abovementioned, we submit that the idea of the anointed leader as one who is above critique and must be obeyed absolutely is not supported in Scripture. How then should one understand the notion of anointment in leadership? In what follows, we shall propose some fundamental guidelines and principles on the exercise of Christian leadership by way of a response to the distorted sense of leadership anointment.

B. Guiding Principles

1. *Implicit in the very concept of being anointed is humility and a willingness to take a downward move.* Jesus the “Christ” or the Anointed One serves as the paradigm for all who are anointed for leadership, he who “did not consider equality with God something to be exploited, but emptied himself” (Phil 2:6-7). If Christ the Anointed One gave his life for others, then all who serve and lead in his name must likewise be marked by self-giving. The truly anointed leader is one who is like the Christ, the Anointed One, in being self-effacing. Leaders jostling for position and power, who “lord it over” others, are positively unChristlike. Christ-honoring leaders are those who seek to be “slave to all,” who like the Son of Man are those who come “not to be served but to serve” and to give their lives as “a ransom for many” (Mk 10:42-45). Leaders make a mockery of what it means to be anointed for service when they expect ‘star’ treatment and behave like prima donnas.

2. *The best of leaders have a dark side, and great leaders can do great good as well as create great havoc.* Sensible leaders recognize that they have blind spots and need others to keep them on the straight and narrow. As a rule of thumb, one should be wary of leaders who are not even wise enough to acknowledge their own duplicity, and foolish enough not to put in place safeguards to protect them from themselves. As leaders we need to recognize we are often our worst enemies; we need to be vigilant and ensure that we do not become a liability to the Kingdom. Spiritual leaders are often painfully aware of the sinful proclivities of their hearts and the ease with which one can be self-deluded about one’s own spiritual strength and prowess.

3. *The cross must ever be at the heart of Christian leadership.* The leader is first and foremost a disciple of Christ before he or she is a leader. And at the heart of discipleship is the cross of Christ. To be anointed for Christian leadership is to be marked by the cross as Christ's life was marked by it. This cross-centeredness characterizes Paul's understanding of his own apostleship, as is evident in his dialectical understanding of power in 2 Corinthians, i.e., power appears as weakness and weakness as power. The power of God is made manifest through human weakness, and it is from a stance of weakness and dependency upon God's power that Christian leaders serve and lead. As Marva Dawn observes, Scripture is suffused with the ethos of God's power coming through human weakness: "God has more need of our weakness than of our strength. Just as powers overstep their bounds and become gods, so our power becomes a rival to God."³ A modest sense of inadequacy and an attitudinal dependency on God's empowerment are hallmarks of a leader operating with a theology of the cross.

4. *All leaders are followers for Christ and are subject to the judging criterion of Scripture.* Christian leaders stand out best when they stand alongside those they lead, not as one who stands apart from, and for whom the rules do not apply. Accountability to the Word of God applies both to those who are led as well as those who do the leading. The same standards are binding on leaders as they are on followers. If anything, leaders are held to an even higher level of accountability to the Word. One of the pitfalls of having gained some measures of success in ministry is that those in positions of authority may begin to think themselves so unlike other lesser mortals that they are no longer subject to those disciplines of life emanating from Scripture. It is not at all surprising that so often in biblical history, the prophets of God should direct their pronouncements of woe on the rich and powerful, on celebrated kings and revered priests in high positions, who thought themselves untouchable.

³ Marva J. Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 47. See also Eugene Peterson & Marva J. Dawn, *The Unnecessary Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p 2-4.

5. *Biblical fidelity must come before organizational or ecclesiastical efficiency.* Alignment of ministry praxis with the demands of Scripture and a concern for the welfare of followers have priority over simply getting things done, or even getting things done efficiently. The suppression of all other voices except the commanding dictates of the supreme leader may translate into a more efficiently run group, church, or organization, but the question remains: At what price? More is needed than just a well-oiled organizational machine. Cost-effectiveness may be an important criterion in business, but it does not always apply in the context of Christian ministry. There are some things in ministry that are not very cost-effective from a business or managerial standpoint, things like visiting the sick, ministering to the dying, counseling the seemingly incorrigible, spending days preparing for a thirty minute message, etc. What is a royal waste of resources from the standpoint of organizational cost-effectiveness is necessary and mandated from the standpoint of scriptural fidelity.

6. *Highly regarded leaders respect the dignity and freedom of their followers, and are committed to their development.* Leaders who are manipulative and coercive, who do not allow people to say no but ride roughshod over their freedom instead, are practicing an immoral form of leadership. To make someone an offer that he or she cannot refuse is to make an immoral offer. It is possible that a leader can build a 'successful' ministry and 'sacrifice' people in the process. Some of these human costs include: burn-out followers, strained marriages, diminished family life, under-developed members, tunnel vision, etc. When people are simply told to perform specified tasks and not encouraged to express themselves or give input to the work they are doing, there is little room for personal growth and development. It is the responsibility of leaders to ensure that those who serve alongside or under them are not used or sacrificed like pawns in a chess game. Followers who serve must be given opportunities in the course of their service to realize their God-given potential. To do this, we need leaders who care genuinely for those they lead. Once again, the model we have is that of Christ our Leader. As we follow him, he not only leads us into Kingdom service, but along the way, we are developed as people.

III. LEADERSHIP AS STEWARDSHIP OF THE TRUTH

Pastors and leaders not only seek to be spiritually mature and Christ-like in their understanding and exercise of leadership, they have a stewardship duty to the revealed truth of God as well. To each generation of Christian leaders, God entrusts the responsibility to faithfully grasp and diligently disseminate the truth of the Gospel. While it is right and proper that leaders should be concerned about building community and putting in place structures that facilitate the touching and transforming of lives for Christ, it is equally important that they do not neglect their duty to the truth of Christ: to understand it properly, to embody it holistically, to articulate and share it creatively, to teach it faithfully and accurately, and to teach others to do the same. More than just shepherding people, Christian leaders today have a duty to shepherd the truth in the sense of safeguarding the apostolic truth of Jesus Christ and seeing to it that it is passed on undistorted to the next generation. This intergenerational responsibility for the passage of truth in history is integral to a theological understanding of Christian leadership.

For this reason, it is not enough that the pastor-leader is understood simply as an organizer of communal life, a provider of pastoral care, or a catalyst for social action. Ours is not just a call to build highly organized churches with huge staff and budgets, or to enroll as many people as possible into our ecclesiastical programs and membership rolls. To us belong the theological task of grasping the truth and passing it on faithfully to the next generation so that decades from now, if Christ tarries, there will be Scripture-defined worshippers of God and followers of Christ in congregations across the face of the earth. It is this duty and responsibility to future generations that must direct and galvanize the efforts of Christian leaders today.

To what did the prophets of old call the people of Israel if not to covenantal fidelity, and how was this understood if not in accordance with the law of Yahweh? Whenever the Israelites departed from the law of the Lord, they fell into grievous sins. Time and again we note the connection between deviation from the true knowledge of the law and covenantal infidelity on the part of the people of God. The prophet Malachi notes in 2:7-9 that the failure of the priests (i.e., leaders) to pass

on true knowledge led to the Israelites straying from the ways of the Lord:

For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts, and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in your instruction.

When leaders are faithful in teaching the truth, they lead their people along the paths of covenantal faithfulness. When they are derelict in their duty to teach the Word, the people are susceptible to straying from the Lord. This principle is discernible in the New Testament, as it continues to hold sway in our day.

This being the case, it is critical that pastors and leaders today recognize that theology, or a proper understanding of the revealed truth of God, is an integral part of their ministry. In this regard, churches that decide against theological training and opt instead to send staff and leaders for management or organizational leadership training are undermining their ability to be good stewards of the truth. Such a pragmatic move is ultimately myopic. We shortchange our congregations in the long haul. The erosion of theological astuteness has serious repercussions. Some of these may not be immediately evident; but make no mistake about it, the effects will be felt down the road. Improving systems and refining structures at the expense of theological substance is like having a super efficient network of gold-plated pipes with no water coursing through them!

By stressing the critical importance of theological wisdom, we are not saying that there are no deficiencies in the way theological education is currently carried out, or that the upgrading of one's managerial and leadership competency is necessarily a bad thing. Far from it. Theological reflection that does not engage with life, or theologians that have no interest in, or concern for the vitality and ministry of the church are not particularly helpful. And there is certainly much room for improvement in terms of how ministry activities are carried out. Nevertheless, what concerns us is the eclipse of theological understanding by a utilitarian pragmatism that is oriented

only to what works rather than what is true, to what will make us successful according to the criteria supplied by our world rather than what will make us faithful to God and the Truth.

The work of leading the church to fulfill God's agenda is at heart a theological undertaking. We see this for instance in the so-called Great Commission of Mt 28:18-20. This is not simply a mandate for organizational activity; the call to make disciples is one set out in highly theological language. Some very significant theological ideas are embedded and presumed in this commission by the risen Lord: (a) The imperative to "make disciples" is premised on a high *Christology*; it originates from one who has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth." Christological assumptions are also implicit in the call to follow Christ. (b) The reference to "all nations" as the field of apostolic activity recalls not only the promise that all the nations of the earth will be blessed through the election of Abraham and the Jews, but also the prophetic vision of the last days when the Shalom of God shall be universalized. We have here the theological notions of *Election* and *Eschatology*. (c) There is a clear *Trinitarian* emphasis: we are to go and baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (d) The truth concerning Christ and the redemptive actions of God in and through him must be taught and passed on—"teaching them to obey everything"—and these include the present imperative to go make disciples! Truth received and understood must then be truth taught and shared. This is consistent with the injunction of 2 Tim 2:1-2 to entrust the message of the Gospel to faithful people who will then go on to teach others to do the same. (e) The promise of Christ's presence to "the end of the age" coheres with the composite teaching of the New Testament on the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ who makes real the risen Christ to the world. Such a *pneumatological* understanding is inseparable from the *eschatological* destiny of history. Theological assumptions permeate this commission. To understand this simply as a programmatic statement is to do injustice to this theologically pregnant commission.

Turning to the apostle Paul, it is interesting to note that even when he speaks authoritatively, his appeals are invariably grounded in the Gospel, which ties him to his converts. He likens his relation to the Corinthians to that of a father with his children, and makes his appeal in an authoritative tone: "For though you might have ten thousand

guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me” (1 Cor 4:15-16). He may, at times, be strident and even fierce in his letters, but Paul’s authority is rooted in the Gospel and not just on the basis of his position. James Dunn, commenting on Paul’s heated letter to the Galatians, writes:

Paul is certainly threatening and fierce enough. But there is no ordering or commanding, not even his characteristic ‘appeal’... Paul was certainly upset, anxious, and angry when he wrote the letter. But he was realistic enough to recognize that an authority overplayed was likely to be an authority repudiated. Even in this his fiercest letter he was aware that the success of his appeal depended first and foremost on the effect of the gospel on his readers.⁴

We find exemplified in Paul a pastoral perspective that is fundamentally theological in that it is oriented to grounding his churches in the truth of the Gospel or getting them back to it. From Paul’s standpoint, the problems facing his churches were not simply matters of organizational deficiency, but consequences of a distortion of the Gospel. He interpreted affairs of the church against the theological grid of the Gospel. Here is a pastor with theological integrity and a theologian with pastoral sensitivity.

One of the key components of the pastor-leader’s duty is to ensure that false ideas are unmasked and robustly confronted. And this cannot be done without the leader’s sensitivities being thoroughly saturated with the truth. The ability to dispel falsehood presupposes an acquaintance with the truth on the part of the leaders. The consequences are patent when leaders neglect the cultivation of a theological mind. Shepherds who cannot discern the masquerades of the wolves are not much good to the sheep under their care! Seen from this light, Christian leaders are engaged in a spiritual warfare, and they need to be proficient in wielding the sword of truth in this battle for the hearts and minds of people.

A theological focus is also implicit in the seeming interchange between the tasks of pastoring and teaching in the list of spiritual gifts

⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p 573-4.

supplied by the writer of Ephesians: “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph 4:11-12). The phrase, “and some” is used to cover both pastors and teachers, indicating that the two are perhaps meant to be interchangeable. In addition, the absence of the article before “teachers” further suggests that the writer had in mind a single category that includes both pastors and teachers. If the designations “pastors” and “teachers” are metonymous expressions as many commentators suggest, then already implicit in pastoral leadership is a teaching component, and by extension a critical and necessary theological focus.

Leadership understood as stewardship of God’s revealed truth distinguishes Christian leadership from other forms of leadership. This situating of leadership within a theological framework is a much needed emphasis given the tendency to either ignore or give minimal attention to theology in current thinking on church or pastoral leadership. That such a summon to return theology to leadership is even necessary is a sad commentary on the captivity of the church to the thought pattern and values of the world.

CONCLUSION

To recapitulate, the exercise of Christian leadership is inseparable from the person of the leader. Who we are will determine the kind of leadership we exercise. Owing to this, the leader must pay attention to the cultivation of the heart and be committed to progress in spiritual maturity, for Christlikeness of character is the soil out of which true authority grows. One of the great indicators of authority in ministry and leadership is the power of a holy and Christ-like life. The idea that the anointed leader cannot be questioned and whose every command is to be obeyed as if coming from God is more compatible with the kind of dictatorial, authoritarian CEO style of leadership one finds in the aggressive world of business than the way of Christ and the way of the cross. Those who are truly anointed for service are those who pattern themselves after Christ, the Anointed One, who gave his life that others might live.

If the authority of leaders stems from their spiritual identification with Christ and the cross, then their Christ-like lives are the result of a sustained exposure to the truth and a diligent and faithful dissemination of the Word. Only as leaders engage the truth and pledge to put themselves under the transformative power of the truth, that their lives are spiritually changed and charged, and their exercise of authority humble and Christ-like. After all is said and done, the spiritual vitality of leaders, the authority with which they go about leading, and the commitment to faithful stewardship of the truth interpenetrate and are inextricably tied one to the other.

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