

Vulnerable Authority: A Theological Approach to Leadership and Teamwork



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Abstract: A salvation history approach to the theology of leadership suggests an ideal of theocratic leadership, the heart of which is the servant leader model of Jesus. Such an ideal can be attained only in as much as leaders are able to find significance in their relationship to God rather than through their status and position as leaders. Such confidence in God empowers a leader to move towards the eschatological imperative of vulnerable authority.

Introduction

However you look at it, leadership is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. Stogdill and Bass's encyclopedic *Handbook of Leadership* (Bass, 1990) includes nearly 10,000 references and a multiplicity of definitions. The word does not even exist in some languages, and despite the plethora of material that has been written, no shared understanding of "leadership" has ever been established.

It is therefore not surprising that Christian texts on leadership have approached the task of definition in widely divergent ways. A number of popular texts (such as Batten, Batten, & Howard, 1997; Beausay, 1998; Briner, 2005; Jones, 1996, 2002; Manz, 1998; Murdock, 1997) take a rather eisegetical approach, finding a plethora of modern managerial practices in the life and ministry of Jesus. The more common (and sober) process (such as that found in Anderson, 1986; Ford, 1991; Gangel, 1989, 1997; Richards & Hoeldtke, 1980; Steele, 1986) tends to develop a biblical understanding of leadership through reference to key texts and/or the study of some of the great biblical leaders such as Moses and David. Another valuable understanding of leadership has come through Clinton's (1988) "leadership emergence theory," which looks both to Scripture and to the great men and women of Christian history for patterns of leadership development that could be seen as trans-historical in relevance. While these all have varying levels of validity, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to the possibility of examining leadership through the lenses of systematic theology.

Some of the greatest theologians of history, either indirectly (Irenaeus, 1885/1987; Tertullian, 1885/1987) or directly (Bengel, 1742/1971; Cullman, 1977; Edwards, 1739/2003; Vos, 1948/1996), have found the organic approach of “salvation history” (*Heilsgeschichte*) a particularly helpful basis for understanding the unfolding work of God in relationship to created humanity. Recognizing that this framework might well provide a valuable lens for examining Christian leadership, the current essay will draw on certain features of the “salvation history” approach, and attempt to offer some possible answers to the following question: In what ways do each of the four great movements of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation instruct our understanding of leadership?

Creation: Theocracy—Not Autocracy or Democracy

Central to the biblical account of Creation are two key teachings: (a) the fiat creative work of God—the Triune God commands and it is—and it is good, and (b) the Creation of humans in the image of God. Through these two foundational teachings, we can see the way in which God functions in relationship to his creation and hence discover an ideal pattern upon which we can model human leadership.

God’s fiat act of Creation was above all an exercise of power and authority, and in granting to created humanity dominion over the rest of Creation, we came to have delegated power and authority. It is noteworthy that the first words of God to Adam and Eve recorded in the Scriptures (Genesis 1:28) are words of command to exercise authority (Packer, 1973). This precedent of delegated authority in Creation is a divine pattern seen throughout the Scriptures.

God’s fiat act of Creation was also in some mysterious way a Trinitarian action—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cooperated in the creative act (Genesis 1:1; 1:2; Colossians 1:16). This first great Trinitarian act recorded in Scripture points to the centrality of teamwork in leadership. The Father did not create without the Son, nor was the Spirit excluded; all played a crucial role. In the same way, as those created in God’s image, human leaders follow the divine model in as much as they seek the synergy of teamwork. Conversely, when a leader functions as a “lone ranger”—believing that he or she, and no other, can do the work of leadership—there is a denial of the God-image that is within us.

But this teamwork was not democratic. Throughout Scripture we see a clear movement of authority within the Godhead: the Father sends the Son, the Father and the Son send the Spirit, the Son sends us, empowered by the Holy Spirit. This “economy of the Trinity” is not a form of subordinationism, but an affirmation that each person of the Godhead plays a different role in

the divine work of Creation and Redemption (Bavinck, 1977, pp. 317–321; Grudem, 1994, p. 245). There is no voting; rather, the biblical pattern reflected from the beginning in the divine model of Creation and seen throughout the Scriptures is that of leaders delegating authority and empowering those appointed to lead. In every case, both the authority to delegate authority and the means of empowerment find their ultimate source in the leader's own delegated authority from God.

Overwhelmingly throughout the Scriptures the ideal model is not that of democracy or autocracy but theocracy; leaders see themselves as, first and foremost, servants and followers under the authority and leadership of God, and from that position lead others. For those nurtured in a context where the ideal of democracy is revered, such a statement may seem shocking. Yet, in contrast to the democratic practices that permeate Western (and particularly American) church structures, nowhere in the New Testament do we find leaders being voted in. Rather the pattern was of leaders who appointed leaders who appointed leaders. Jesus' *appointing* of the apostles (Mark 3:14) was completely his own initiative, "calling to himself whom he himself desired" (Story, 2004). Likewise it was the apostles' (and not the church's) initiative to *appoint* the Seven (Acts 6:3–6), Paul and Barnabas *appointed* elders for the churches in the region of Lystra and Iconium (Acts 14:23), and Titus was called on to *appoint* elders in Crete (Titus 1:5). Even Acts 15 was not so much democratic as it was the typical Middle Eastern phenomenon of "tribal leader," with James taking counsel from the elders but largely making the decision himself.

Unfortunately, while theocratic leadership sounds good in theory, it is difficult to apply in practice. It is far too easy for church leaders to claim theocratic leadership as a spiritualized guise for autocratic control, particularly in high-grid societies such as the Middle East or Latin America (Lingenfelter, 1992). While there is no doubt a strong cultural influence in the advocacy for democratic leadership patterns in Western churches, it is probable that fear of the abusive practices so common in autocratic leadership plays an equally significant role. The ubiquitous reporting of spiritual abuse recorded in Christian books, journals, and magazines (Johnson & Van Vonderen, 1991) makes democratic church leadership a most attractive alternative. However, the implications of the Fall raise further questions concerning leadership.

Fall: Cultural Patterns as both Good and Evil

In the Fall the good of Creation was not lost but corrupted. Consequently, in every person there is something good that reflects the image of God, but something evil that reflects the Fall, and in every situation we do well to name both the good and the evil. Moreover, as social beings, not only

individuals but also societies and cultures reflect something of God's image and something of the Fall. In other words, the Fall teaches us that culture is not values-neutral. The problem, of course, is that we readily see the goodness in our own culture and the fallenness in other cultures, while we are blind to the fallenness in our own culture and the goodness in other cultures. But ultimately all cultures stand under the judgment of God.

As Christianity becomes an increasingly global phenomenon, it is imperative for Christian leaders to examine cultural factors in leadership theologically. Christian churches, organizations, and institutions around the world are increasingly finding themselves with international and/or multicultural personnel. In such a context, effective Christian organizations are those that recognize that *all* cultural patterns of leadership reflect something of the divine image and something of the Fall, and seek from each contributing culture to maximize the impact of the former and minimize the impact of the latter.

To accomplish such a goal requires what Pazmiño (1997) describes as a two-stage process of "contextualization" and "decontextualization." The first stage involves understanding and appreciating the different potential contributions our own and other cultures can make to organizational synergy. The second stage involves rising above the patterns of our own and other cultures through critical analysis in light of the Scriptures.

With respect to leadership, our cultural background greatly influences our preference for vertical or horizontal patterns of power, for autocracy or democracy. Most of us are so embedded within our culture that it can be very difficult to see that theologically the attraction to *both* autocracy and democracy is largely the product of the Fall. In our human pride and ambition we have fallen from the beauty and order that have always been God's ideal, and part of this beauty and order is the ideal of theocratic leadership.

As with so much of the created order, the divine ideal of theocratic delegated authority became distorted through the Fall: the ideal of dominion degenerated into domination, and lies and mistrust undermined the basis for teamwork. The created powers (Colossians 1:16; Ephesians 6:12), once related to the creative will of God, are now in revolt and rebellion against God their creator (Foster, 1985). As in so many other areas of life, there has been a rejection of God's kingdom and the attempt to replace it with our own little kingdoms. This is readily seen in autocratic leaders; it is less readily acknowledged but equally true in democratic leadership patterns—for democracy is in fact thoroughly human-centered in its orientation, usually reticent to acknowledge the need before God to embrace such words as obedience and submission.

It is noteworthy that throughout the Scriptures the opposite of faith is not so much unbelief as fear (Rhoads, 1993), and both autocracy and democracy are the product of fear. Autocracy is built on the leader's fear of loss of

control and is fed through the fear of the followers; democracy is built on the fear of autocratic leadership, and is equally fed by the fear of the group. In the end we are left with the choice between the tyranny of the one and the tyranny of the many. While the latter may be a preferable option to the former, little consideration is given to the possibility that there may in fact be a better alternative.

But what alternative is there? The one great attempt at “theocracy” in the Scriptures (Israel under the leadership of Moses and the judges) was ultimately rejected in favor of the autocracy of a king. Throughout history virtually every attempt at theocratic rule has led to dictatorship or some other form of heavy-handed leadership. And we Christians are not the only ones who struggle with this; such so-called “theocratic Islamic” states as Saudi Arabia and Iran are among the most oppressive autocratic nations in the world today. Is theocracy simply a nice romantic ideal but a totally unworkable option? Is it not inevitable that we see autocracy and democracy as the only viable approaches to leadership?

It is at this point that we must turn to the redemptive work of Christ—an act not restricted to the cross but embedded in the whole “Christ-event” of incarnation, crucifixion, and exaltation.

Redemption: The Authority to Serve

The incarnation stands as one of the most remarkable events in the history of salvation. That in Jesus God should dirty himself with the filth of human existence is so shocking that this foundational Christian belief is for many a major barrier to the message of the gospel. Yet this precious belief is not simply a nice piece of doctrinal philosophizing, but the exact opposite—in Jesus, God provided us with a tangible model of the divine ideal to which we are called to strive.

In particular, Jesus demonstrated the true nature of divine leadership, “who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant . . . and humbled himself . . . even to death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6–8). What was Jesus’ model? It was a thoroughly vertical (“high-grid”) leadership pattern, but a vertical pattern turned on its head. In a cultural context very similar to the contemporary Middle East where “so-called” rulers (Story, 2004, p. 184) lorded it over those under them and high officials enjoyed their power, Jesus presented a radically different model—“. . . not so with you. . . . Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant . . . the slave of all” (Mark 10:42–44).

As a respected leader, so much of Jesus’ behavior was culturally shocking; he prioritized his attention to those others rejected; he showed little concern

with his own image; he shocked even his own disciples by doing what they were unwilling to do in washing their feet (John 13:1–17); he humbled himself even to death on a cross—an event so shameful that our Muslim brethren refuse to accept that it happened. So easily we forget the shocking fact that God did not merely model fiat power; he also modeled self-giving and humiliating love. And Jesus calls on his disciple-leaders to be like God in self-giving love, even in the willingness to be humiliated. In other words, we can become like Jesus only when we stop trying to be God.

It is perhaps at this point more than any other that Christian leaders have been seduced by the fallen society around them. The “business” model of church (Budde & Brimlow, 2002; Sine, 2003; White, 1979; c.f. Symonds, 2005) and mission (Bonk, 1991; Engel & Dryness, 2000) with its preoccupation with methods, numbers, finances, and marketing has too often (albeit subtly) shifted our focus from internal transformation to external appearances—expensive buildings and the material success of the organization, even to the honor and respect of the surrounding society. Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in theological institutions, where the emphasis (most notably in curricular development) has increasingly been shaped more by the patterns and wishes of the secular community than by submission to the values of the kingdom of God.

Particularly among Christian leaders who come from humble backgrounds, the tendency to crave recognition and control is an ever-present danger. Paulo Freire (1982) once observed, “It is a rare peasant who, once promoted to overseer, does not become more of a tyrant towards his former comrades than the owner himself” (p. 30). The seeking after the respect of this world is indeed seductive—and dangerous. By nature Christians are called to be different from the society around. When status and image become prime factors in institutional decision-making, the model presented by Jesus would suggest that those in leadership are living as those fallen *but not* redeemed.

The problem of course is that most leaders are very adept at putting on a public face to those who do not know them personally, and Christian leaders are no exception. So easily we can appear very humble and loving people, while those who know us know how much we crave the public eye and long for the “bravos,” and how reluctant we are to surrender our authority—even to those more gifted than we are. Christian history provides us with all the tools for hypocrisy. As Nouwen (1989) describes it, “The long painful history of the Church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led” (p. 60).

Does this mean that the divine model is that of the total forfeit of one’s selfhood in response to the felt needs of others? Bradley (1999) has rightly pointed out the dangers associated with a “servant leadership” model, particularly when the person in leadership is perceived as weak or indecisive, a

problem particularly prevalent in high-grid societies (p. 52). However, I would suggest that this critique reflects a misunderstanding of servant leadership. As Gibbs (1981) puts it, Christian leaders are called to “hold the towel of humility, not the door-mat of subservience which everyone can walk over” (p. 379). The radical paradox of servant-leadership is that we are called not only to serve but also to lead.

The Search for Significance

But how can this work out in practice? Is the talk of “servant leader” simply a pleasant aphorism with little practical meaning? A careful study of the model of Jesus would suggest a solution in the source of the leader’s significance—the extent to which the leader’s identity is found in his or her relationship with God, as against the need for power or influence over others, or the significance attributed to his or her role and function as leader.

In his penetrating article “Jesus as Lord, Jesus as Servant,” Diogenes Allen (1998) contrasts the destructive Hegelian master-slave relationship with the liberating and beneficial lordship of Jesus. Hegel’s master “denies the personality of his slaves, [absorbing] their reality by making them an extension of his will. . . . He does everything for his own sake, in order to be a lord, in order to have the status of a master” (p. 297). In contrast Jesus does not seek to deny our person, but to enhance and free us. Allen goes on to describe the source of Jesus’ different kind of lordship, one in which he can indeed be Lord, can command us and have us depend on him, without this relationship becoming destructive to our personality:

The foundation of Jesus’ relation to his disciples and to us is that he does not need us. This may sound harsh and false at first, but it is really the basis of his ability to serve us and elevate us. He does not need us in this sense: Jesus is Lord because of who he is, not because he has followers. He is Lord by his own inherent reality. He is Lord because he is the Son of God. It isn’t because of us that he is the Son of God. Hegel’s master is a master only if he has slaves. His status depends on having subordinates. He cannot afford to serve them, for then he ceases to be master. He cannot afford to have them come to any sense of fullness, for any degree of independence threatens his status. But Jesus is the Son of the Father whether we like it or not. His position, his status, his authority do not spring from anything human. They do not depend even on our acknowledgment. Without a single disciple, he is still the Son of God. (p. 297)

Stated simply, the source of Jesus’ lordship is found in his relationship with the Father, not in the extent of his power and influence over his follow-

ers. It is perhaps at Jesus' baptism that this is seen most clearly. As Jesus comes to John he has not even begun his public ministry. He has no followers. He has as yet made no public manifestation of his authority over the powers. Few, if any, have an inkling of Jesus' identity. Yet it is precisely in this context that the voice from heaven declares, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Jesus does not need us in order to be Lord, and it is because his status does not rest on us that he can serve us.

He can wash his disciples' feet and not thereby cease to be the Son. He can free people of demons and from other ailments, and this improvement in their condition does not threaten his status. He can be free to let people choose voluntarily to respond to his call to follow him; for whether they reject or accept him, he is still the Son of the Father. He can even be slain for us, bearing the awful catastrophe of human evil, without ceasing to be Lord. Precisely because he differs from us in kind, his lordship does not need to reduce our reality. Because his lordship rests on the Father, he is free to enhance us. (Allen, 1998, p. 297)

Here is painted richly for us the ideal picture of Christian leadership. As with Christ, when we reach the point of confidence in God through our firm relationship with him such that we no longer need the praise and subordination of others—at that point we are free truly to serve in authority and under authority.

It is noteworthy that the central act of power recorded in the New Testament is an act of humiliation—the cross of Christ, the power of God unto salvation (I Corinthians 1:18–25), the "glorification" of Jesus (John 12:23; 13:31–32). As Moltmann (1977) describes it, "The divine glory is revealed on the face of the crucified Jesus; it no longer belongs to the crowns of kings or the fame of a nation or any other earthly authorities" (p. 92).

A similar picture is painted in the Revelation where the redeemed have overcome by the power of his blood, by the word of their testimony (read "martyrdom"), and did not love their lives even to death (Revelation 12:11). The point is: if we are already dead, then no one can control us apart from God. This same power was exercised by the early Christian leaders. As Jesus effectively judged Pilate (John 19:10–11), so Peter and John (Acts 5:29–32), and then Stephen (Acts 7:51–53), as those who feared none but God, each judged those who sought to judge them. While people can make life extremely difficult for us, ultimately no one can have power over us if our only authority is God.

There is no question but that many of the problems we bemoan in Christian leadership are due to the search for significance. All people long to feel significant, and many seek this significance through position and authority,

and through the respect and honor of others. But ultimately true significance is found not in the opinions of others, but in one's relationship with Christ. It is only when leaders cease to need others for their own psychological well being that they are freed to see and to meet the needs of those whom God has called them to serve.

All three of Satan's temptations to Jesus were effectively calls to prove his authority—to show everyone that he was indeed who he claimed to be—Son of God and Lord of all: "If you are the Son of God . . . If you are the Son of God . . . All this will I give you" (Matthew 4:1–10). Of all his devious ways, this continues to be Satan's most powerful tool against Christian leaders—to tempt us to feel that we need to prove that we are indeed the leaders we claim to be, to make sure that everyone views us well.

But as with Christ, our authority comes not from how people view us, but from our own vested authority from God. In the gospel record many people were astonished at Jesus and his authority, but there is only one person about whom it is recorded that Jesus himself was astonished in a positive way and that is the Centurion, whose depth of faith and insight was reflected in his words, "For I myself am a man under authority" (Matthew 8:9; Luke 7:8). This man recognized, as no one else had, that all authority comes from above and consequently must be exercised with responsibility and humility.

To a great extent this is what Holy Spirit giftedness is about. The spiritual gifts are one of the most dramatic evidences of vested divine authority. We are not gifted because of any inherent qualities within us, but these gifts are to those "led captive in his train" (note the language of slavery) for the express purpose of "preparing God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all . . . [attain] to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:7–13). Spiritual giftedness is not a whimsical act, but a call to the responsible exercise of authority. As those under divine authority we must exercise our gifts and ensure that others are able to exercise their gifts as their divine-given authority (Steele, 1986, p. 9).

The Imperative of Servant Leadership

While the terminology may be recent, the imperative of servant leadership for Christian ministry was not the birth-child of "the tumultuous 1960s and early 1970s" (Cooper, 2005, p. 49), but finds its roots in the earliest pages of the Hebrew Scriptures. One of the great paradoxes of the Old Testament is the consistent offensiveness of the term "slave"—the bondage of slavery in Egypt being the "nadir point of [Israel's] historical tradition" (Hanson, 1986, p. 4). Yet the term "Slave of Yahweh" was used to describe the most revered of Israel's leaders: Abraham (Psalm 105:42), Jacob (Ezekiel 37:25), Moses (Exodus 14:31), Joshua (Joshua 24:29), David (II Samuel 3:18), Elijah (II Kings

9:36), not to mention the “Suffering Servant of Yahweh” of Isaiah 42–53, God’s great agent of salvation. The New Testament presents Jesus as the fulfillment of the Suffering Servant. He himself interpreted his entire ministry in the light of this role, and in pointing to himself as the model and example of servanthood set a servant posture as the basis for Christian ministry (Segler, 1987, p. 431).

Part of our problem in accepting the imperative of servant leadership is our lack of models. Our world of efficiency and control—even within the hallowed walls of our churches and Christian organizations—has little room for the inverted vertical theocratic form of leadership seen in Jesus. Yet, as Hiebert (1989) has observed, it is only through servant leadership that we can begin to address the worldwide leadership crisis in the church. So long as leadership is perceived in terms of power and status, the fear of training the next generation to leadership will persist, lest “my” position and status is taken by another. It takes a servant attitude to be willing not merely to train leaders for future replacement of my own ministry, but to *rejoice* when another is able more effectively *now* to take my position of leadership and do my job.

In a world of growing societal complexity and mistrust of institutions, the model of servant leadership is becoming an increasingly pressing imperative. The emerging generations are seeking authority and leadership, built not on power and control but on a proven and trusted record of self-sacrifice, service, and empowerment.

Empowering Authority

As with Christ, true authority comes not through forced authority but through a chosen submission of love. Rather than seeking to control those they have been called to lead, Christian leaders follow the divine model given in Christ when they seek above all else to serve their best, to seek the growth and enhancement of others, and to empower them in their own emerging leadership.

The pattern of empowering delegation evident in the Godhead is seen throughout the Scriptures: in the Old Testament God delegated and empowered Adam (Genesis 2:19), Moses (Exodus 3:12), Samuel (I Samuel 3:19–21), David (I Samuel 16:12), and so the list goes on. Most significantly, God delegated and empowered Jesus who delegated and empowered the apostles: “As the Father has sent me so I send you” (John 20:21). In each case the pattern is one of freedom under authority; Jesus did not seek to control the apostles’ every movement, but gave them the freedom to exercise authority under his authority—even when that exercise was imperfect and sinful. And even in their sinfulness and weakness (we must not forget that Judas was among

those sent out), Jesus gave them the power needed “to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness” (Matthew 10:1). And in the Pentecostal sending of the Holy Spirit the empowerment of those called to lead under Jesus’ divine authority is made complete.

The scriptural model is not one of studious oversight and control, but one in which those in leadership first delegate to those who are gifted and then seek to empower them to do the tasks for which God has gifted them—and all for the good of the whole body of Christ. When leaders function as though they have all the gifts, they are in effect claiming to be God. In reality no leader has all the gifts. Rather all believers are called on to complete one another and to let others complete them; only in this way can the community of faith truly aspire to be the body of Christ.

This transformation of leadership from a controlling follower-developing pattern to an empowering leader-developing pattern can emerge only in as much as leaders are freed from the need to find their significance in their role as leaders. Allen (1998) comments that through finding our significance solely through our relationship with God, “[Jesus] seeks to free us of the need to have our person established by domination over others. He seeks to free us of the need to gain recognition at the expense of others” (p. 297). The route to this realization is eschatological: “We therefore do not have to compete with each other in order to become ourselves; for what we are to become is not to be gained in the realm of earthly dominance. . . . It is by following him that we can enter the kingdom in which we can serve each other” (p. 298).

Consummation: Vulnerable Authority

Being free to serve and exercising empowering authority is the redemptive ideal modeled in Christ. Unfortunately, the reality with which we all struggle is that, although Redemption has been won in Christ, we are still tainted by sin. And this sin-taintedness touches even our institutional leadership. Only in the Consummation will all things be renewed. Only in the Consummation will our eyes be opened to see our true relationship to God, and hence experience the trust and love that was God’s ideal from the beginning. Only in the Consummation will we understand fully what it means to be both servants and kings (Revelation 5:10).

But for now we live between the already and the not yet, experiencing the first fruits of the *eschaton* but awaiting the final consummation. Such a position has implications not simply at the individual level, but also at the corporate—even the national and international—level. As followers of Jesus Christ we need to recognize that even our Christian organizations and institutions are tainted by sin, and that part of our faithful discipleship is to do all we can to reflect the consummate glory of Christ. As such, honest institutional self-

evaluation is not optional—it is an imperative. Christian leaders must continually place their churches and organizations under scrutiny—and this through lenses more impacted by God’s purposes than by the cultural patterns of the world around. Such honest self-evaluation can only be accomplished if leaders have the courage to exercise vulnerable authority.

Unfortunately, particularly in high-grid societies, being vulnerable is seen by many leaders (especially male leaders) as a great weakness (Lingenfelter & Mayers, 2003); we must never under any circumstances reveal weakness or failure lest it undermine our status and respect and lest we lose our honor and the honor of the institution we lead. Consequently many Christian leaders develop a deep concern to appear strong, confident, and faultless. A sad corollary is that effective constructive evaluation becomes difficult if not impossible, for to recognize that the institutions they lead have weaknesses will be interpreted to mean that in some way they themselves have failed.

Too often “image” becomes an all-consuming concern. But “image” is simply another word for hypocrisy—in Greek the “hypocrite” is the one who acts a part (Wilckens, 1972). Image is one of the things that Jesus attacked most vehemently—and that in a society where image was of the utmost importance.

The concern for image is pervasive in honor-shame societies. However, the same concern for image is becoming increasingly influential in the West as well; as the media progressively dominates the psyche, and as churches and Christian organizations find themselves competing in a sort of ecclesiastic marketplace, Christian leaders very often find themselves focusing on appearances, both of themselves as individuals and of the organizations they lead (Budde & Brimlow, 2002; Symonds, 2005).

In such contexts it is very difficult to stand against the tide, but to do otherwise is a denial of the whole redemptive work of Jesus. When leaders avoid at all costs being vulnerable, when they are reluctant to acknowledge weakness and fault, when they resist allowing their leadership to be subject to evaluation, they are effectively claiming that they are not between the already and the not yet, but have already attained perfection and consequently have no need for the cross.

It is noteworthy that the one person in the Scriptures described as “a man after God’s own heart” (I Samuel 13:14; Acts 7:46; 13:22) was a liar, thief, murderer, and adulterer. David was a man who exercised enormous authority and often abused his position in the most appalling way. Yet he was a “man after God’s own heart” precisely because even from his position of authority he was willing to be vulnerable before God and the people he served. In the face of Nathan’s scathing rebuke, David carried all the authority to cover his sin and weakness, to displace his guilt on others, to find a way to save face. Yet in a context where “image” was everything, David publicly repented and pro-

duced in response one of the greatest and most beloved of the Psalms (II Samuel 12; Psalm 51).

Only when leaders are willing to be vulnerable—with self and with God—can they avoid the pitfalls of the abuses of autocracy and the paralysis of democracy, and truly serve with authority. Only when they are willing and able to hear and receive valid criticism without being controlled by it, only then can they aspire to excellence as individuals and as leaders of God's people.

Conclusion

There is always more that can be said, and it would be a courageous writer who would claim to have made the definitive interpretation of leadership through the lenses of salvation history. I am particularly aware that the advocacy of theocratic leadership will not be well received by those nurtured to believe that the ideal of democracy is somehow sacrosanct. Nonetheless, the model of theocratic servant leadership provided in the person and work of Jesus impresses itself as an imperative on all Christian leaders, all the more so in the cynical postmodern world we encounter today. Such an ideal can be attained only in as much as leaders are able to find personal significance in their relationship to God rather than through their status and position.

As Christian leaders living between the already of Christ's Redemption and the not yet of the Consummation, the challenge is always before us to look honestly and carefully in the light of Christ's model at our ourselves and our role as leaders, and strive toward the ideal of self-giving theocratic leadership. By so doing we can strive toward God's way of excellence in Christian leadership—the excellent way of love and vulnerable authority.

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