

# LEADERSHIP AFTER GOD'S LIKENESS

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One of the most important insights about leadership to have emerged from a variety of quarters is that all leadership is contextual. That is, any expression of leadership will inevitably be shaped by the nature of the organisation or other context in which it is located, and the particular goals and purposes for which that organisation exists.

This insight, incidentally, cautions us against importing too uncritically leadership practices or convictions from contexts which might have competing or dissonant purposes from those of the Church or other context in which we are leading.

Whilst many organisations will have in common a concern for motivating and coordinating the efforts of

workers or other key contributors, (and thus any wisdom around how this might be accomplished might well be widely applicable), there will be a degree of difference between leadership in an organisation focussed on maximising profit or productivity, and leadership in a church, where the focus is on seeing the goals of God's kingdom accomplished.

Given that the Church is, according to Newbigin, the 'sign, foretaste and instrument of God's kingdom', leadership within the Church must inevitably be shaped by an understanding of who God is and a faithful imitation of his own ways of working. Christian leadership must, in other words, follow the contours of Christian theology. Whilst not an exhaustive list, the following four theological motifs exercise a profound influence on how Christian leadership might be understood and practiced.

## CREATION: LEADERSHIP AS STEWARDSHIP

A conviction that the world and everything in it is created by God, reminds us that we alone do not ultimately have the authority to determine the trajectory for the world nor for any group of people for whom we have responsibility either in the Church, the workplace or in a voluntary capacity. That authority belongs to God, and our task is to exercise our own leadership responsibilities in a way which conforms to his express will, and which is in accord with his character.

God's intention in creating humankind in his image is for us to exercise stewardship over his creation, ruling and overseeing things on his behalf. Creation reminds



us of our proper place in God's economy but also of our special calling and of the responsibilities which come with this.

Perhaps, most significantly for our own purposes as those with an interest in leadership, the Christian understanding of creation has profound implications for the way in which we will treat others. One of the criticisms rightly levelled at certain leadership understandings, and at a good deal of business practice, is that when we lose sight of the created nature of the world, it becomes easy for people to become commodified and be treated in a purely instrumental manner, as means to the achieving of ends conceived by leaders or other stakeholders.

The leader who sees herself as primarily a steward of God's creation will have a far more benevolent and concerned approach to people, recognising that they too, no matter what their place in any organisation, are to be stewarded and nurtured along with every other part of creation. So, Peter urges his audience to be good stewards (οἰκονομοί) of the grace of God, serving one another in the use of their gifts (1 Peter 4:10), whilst Paul employs the same word to describe the ministry of the overseer (ἐπισκοπος) who stewards the church of God (Acts 20:28-29).

#### **INCARNATION: LEADERSHIP AS ENGAGEMENT**

Perhaps the most striking truth about God's way of exercising influence is that, at the most critical moment in his engagement with the world, rather than dispensing instruction and influence from a distance, he enters into the very stuff of creation, becoming a human being and living amongst us (John 1:14).

Not only is Jesus the perfect model of leadership by virtue of his own leadership practice, but the very manner in which he laid aside heavenly privilege and immersed himself in the arena of human life, involving himself in the most thoroughgoing way with those whom he sought to lead back to God, is paradigmatic for authentically Christian leadership.

Christian leaders are not those who lord it over others from on high or at a distance. Rather, they are called to be those who lead from alongside others, from below, certainly leading with strength and authority, but an authority rooted in an appeal which gains credibility from a commitment to those whom they lead, and which is manifest in their choice to identify with them.

The incarnational leader, following the pattern of Christ, will be willing to serve in unfashionable and overlooked places, to live in communities which, given

the choice, they might prefer to avoid, to draw alongside those who are profoundly different, all for the sake of exercising the leadership entrusted to them by Christ for the benefit of such people.

#### **TRINITY: LEADERSHIP AS COLLABORATION**

To speak of God as Trinity is not to imagine the three persons of the Godhead as somehow existing as three distinct departments, each with their own specific areas of responsibility, but rather as existing in dynamic relationship whereby each can only be understood and experienced in the context of that mutual relationship. The mutual interdependence of the Trinity thus becomes the defining model for our understanding of our own leadership. As Stephen Pickard (Theological Foundations for Collaborative Ministry, p43) puts it:

'The ministries of the ecclesia are called to recognise and call attention to the trace of God's energetic and holy order. As the ministries of the church serve this implicit divine order they enable the church to realise itself as the embodiment and witness to the reality of God in the world. But the ministries cannot do this if they are not properly coordinated as instantiations of God's own ordering, i.e., intrinsically related in a "mode of togetherness" such that they raise each other to the fulness of the ministry of each.'

Christian leadership will always be collaborative, and one of the principal concerns of any leader will be to identify others with whom leadership responsibility might be shared, who might particularly reflect



strengths in areas where that leader is weak, and in collaboration with whom joint working might achieve far more than merely the sum of individual contributions.

### **ESCHATOLOGY: LEADERSHIP AS CATALYST FOR CHANGE**

To describe the Church as eschatological is to affirm that the final page of history has been written and that the whole of creation is hastening towards the end set for it by God, the summing up of all things in Christ (Ephesians 1:10).

The Church is called, and enabled by the eschatological Spirit, to represent the new life of this coming kingdom in all that we are and do. The age in which we now live, (the provisional age between the inauguration of the kingdom on earth in the ministry of Jesus and its consummation which will take place on his return), is not an age of passive waiting for something to happen. It is an active participation with God in the proclamation and demonstration of the presence, ahead of time, of that eschatological kingdom. Our confidence in a God who is forever making all things new leads us to hope for the transformation of people, structures and communities, and to play our part in seeing the release of God's presence and power for such transformation to take place. This understanding of the context in which the Church is set has profound implications for our understanding of the role of its leadership. (The impact of eschatology on leadership in different spheres of life is explored much more fully in Padfield, J., 2019, *Hopeful Influence*, Norwich: Hymns Ancient and Modern.)

Firstly, we must say that leaders are not simply called to be custodians of the past (the guarding of foundational tradition is a legitimate concern of leadership), but also catalysts for the embracing of God's future. By signalling to the Church, and the world, its ultimate destination, we encourage others to lay hold of this future now and to become increasingly habituated to the realities of the age which has come in Christ and which will fully come at his parousia.

Secondly, given the transformative nature of God's kingdom we must say that leadership will always be directly concerned with being a catalyst for change. By this we do not, of course, simply mean that leaders are always to be concerned with novelty for novelty's sake. Rather, leaders are those who enable others to move forward with God, and to restructure their lives and the life of churches and other organisations in line with the preferences of God's kingdom.

Finally, we might also observe that it is this eschatological tension that makes leadership such an uncomfortable, at times, vocation. Part of the calling of a leader is to experience a greater restlessness than others. We occupy the place of tension between maintaining tradition and adapting for a new context, between preserving the past and innovating for the future, between ensuring stability and enabling change. These are experiences which are by no means unique to Christian leadership, but from which authentically kingdom-focused leaders will never be immune.



### **FOR REFLECTION**

1. What fresh insights does this article give you into the distinctive nature of Christian leadership?
2. Are there specific ways in which your own exercise of leadership needs to be adjusted in order to more faithfully reflect the theological emphases highlighted above?
3. What impact will a conviction that the church is 'the sign, foretaste and instrument of God's kingdom' have on our understanding and practice of leadership?