

**Christian Leadership ‘Between the Times’:
An Apocalyptic, Communitarian, and Missional View
of Christian Influence**

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A dispute also arose among [the disciples] as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But [Jesus] said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

“You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Luke 22:24-30 (NRSV)

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

John 15:12-17 (NRSV)

Introduction: Leadership and Influence

The issue of Christian leadership is firmly on the agenda of most modern Churches.¹ Often this is merely a carryover from the world of business however the question of leadership has also been driven by such concerns as the ‘effectiveness’ of ‘the Church’ and parachurch ministries in a culture that has largely pushed Christian denominations to the margins of cultural influence.² In such a climate, there is controversy over the shape that Christian mission should take³ and questions of Christian leadership are often caught up in such controversies.⁴ How should Christian leaders behave or function in a context where they are being ‘measured’ for ‘effectiveness’ or ‘growth’ or ‘productivity’ or—to use a current buzzword—‘impact’? Further, does *Christian* leadership answer to much the same criteria that leadership does in business or other organizations? Is there anything *distinctive* in Christian leadership?

The booming literature on Christian leadership, though often taking cues from the secular world of business and management studies, strives to show some level of distinctiveness. Naturally, the Bible, particularly the New Testament, is frequently harnessed to expound a Christian view of leadership. The results of such surveys and expositions vary. For some leadership thinkers, the particular goals of Christians—spreading the gospel, growing churches, multiplying cell groups—are what that makes them distinctive, yet the principles of leadership are either drawn from so-called ‘common sense’ (i.e. the wider world) or unreflectively from favoured personality types. Some attempt to draw general principles of ‘leadership *per se*’ from Bible stories of ‘great leaders’—Moses, Joshua, Nehemiah, Jesus, or Paul, for instance, with a presumed set of ‘leadership questions’ to ask of those stories. Others think that Christians bring different ‘values’ to their leadership roles that are somehow inserted into the ostensibly neutral principles and practices shared between forms of church leadership and other forms of organizational leadership. Many embrace a model such as ‘servant leadership’⁵ and take this as the main Christian contribution to leadership models.

¹ Robert Banks and Bernice M. Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership: A Christian Evaluation of Current Approaches*. Engaging Culture (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 20-21

² See Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*. Christian Mission and Modern Culture (Herefordshire: Gracewing; Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1997)

³ See Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson; Erina, NSW: Strand, 2003)

⁴ See Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, and Liminality*. Christian Mission and Modern Culture (Herefordshire: Gracewing; Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1997)

⁵ See Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977). On the influence of Greenleaf’s servant leadership model, see Larry C. Spears, ed., *Reflections on Leadership: How Robert K. Greenleaf’s Theory of Servant-Leadership Influenced Today’s Top Management Thinkers* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1995).

None of these however, seem satisfactory on their own. While they contain positive elements—the ‘creational’ recognition of wisdom outside of God’s people, the desire to ground contemporary praxis in biblical examples, and some kind of ethical differentiation from the norms of ‘the world’—they often do not ask enough of the important questions as to whether the radical nature of the story of Jesus—the gospel—will exercise its tendency to turn our world upside down even here in the supposedly straightforward sphere of leadership. They often do not ask whether the surprising vocation of the Christian community calls for unexpected—and so, unconventional—forms of leadership.

One prominent idea about leadership that has been stressed among Christian writers is that of *influence*. For instance, Walter Wright defines leadership as a “relationship in which one person seeks to influence the thoughts, behaviours, beliefs or values of another person.”⁶ Influence is most certainly on the agenda of Christian leadership, yet is this a sufficient definition of leadership: is the ‘ability to influence’ necessarily *leadership*? Don’t people strongly ‘influence’ others in negative ways through destructive behaviours that are not necessarily ‘bad leadership’? Influence must certainly be ‘on the radar’ of leadership but it is an inadequate definition on its own. What, we may ask, is the *kind* of influence that Christian leadership will exercise? What makes Christian influence distinctive? Robert Clinton pushes the definition a little further and sees leadership as “a dynamic process in which a man or woman with God-given capacity influences a special group of God’s people toward his purposes for the group.”⁷

Will beginning with the question of leadership help us in this regard—influencing a special group of God’s people toward his purposes—or do we need take a step back to survey the larger canvas of the Biblical story in order to see where our leadership reflections might need to be re-ordered? The latter option will be our approach, seeking to understand what Christian leadership might entail against the background of biblical theology and with some critical integration with contemporary moral and political philosophy along with other leadership studies.

Three Theological Questions for Christian Leaders

1. *If I Am a Leader, Where Am I Going?: Eschatology and Transformative Vision*

The question of *purpose* cannot be ignored if we are to foster a truly human life. As Stanley Grenz notes, human beings are creatures made with a sense of the future and an openness, given

⁶ Walter C. Wright, *Relational Leadership: A Biblical Model for Influence and Service* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000)

⁷ J. Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs, Col.: NavPress, 1988), p. 14. See also Henry T. Blackaby and Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People to God’s Agenda* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001)

the right conditions, to a wide range of potentialities and possibilities.⁸ Human beings are purposeful creatures who are 'going somewhere'; who have a *telos*; who have goals, aims and *ends*. Human aspirations are rooted in their bodily life and shaped by social relationships, circumstances and expectations but are claimed and redirected by the "anastatic"⁹ call of the gospel of Jesus the risen Messiah toward the purposes of the kingdom of God. Graeme Goldsworthy has called this the "kingdom of right relationships"¹⁰ and, as far as it goes, this seems right: "God's people living under God's rule in God's place."¹¹

In short, this means that *all* of life is claimed by the kingdom of God as a site of transformation for God's purposes in Christ: "all things were created for him" (Col. 1:16). There will be a final transformation accomplished by God but in the present time, we are collaborators or co-workers with God as an expression of His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:20-6:1).¹² We are the pioneers of the new creation and it is in this idea that leadership and appropriate influence will be properly understood. This also means that the *scope* of Christian leadership extends beyond the (so-called) 'spiritual' dimension and extends into the (so-called) 'secular' world that is, in fact, God's creation and the object of His saving action (Rom 8:18-25).

However, the present age is understood in the New Testament in *apocalyptic* terms as "the present evil age" (Gal. 1:2) and hence it is a field of conflict as the order of the age to come is planted in the midst of the present order of things. In this case, Christian leadership must not only be aware of the problem of *interpersonal* conflict but also the reality of 'trials' and conflict between many of the norms and assumptions of the everyday world and norms and convictions that the kingdom of God seeks to impress upon the world. This conflictual aspect should not be reduced simply to a clash of 'values' (that nebulous, subjective modern substitute for substantive moral discourse and deliberation).¹³ Instead, the very practices that

⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994)

⁹ See James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986) for his three spheres of ethics: the organic, the communal and the anastatic.

¹⁰ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom in The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001)

¹¹ *ibid.* Chris Wright points to the three-fold order of relationships¹¹ for which the biblical revelation looks to eschatology for resolution of problems and transformation. These incorporate, firstly, the overarching and determinative relationship with God, the Creator and Redeemer; secondly, the relationships we have with other human beings, and thirdly, the relationships we have with the non-human creation, especially the economy of land and possessions: see Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2004)

¹² See N. T. Wright, "On Becoming the Righteousness of God: 2 Corinthians 5:21" in *Pauline Theology*. Vol. 2: *1 & 2 Corinthians*. ed. David M. Hay (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993)

¹³ Despite its common occurrence and the necessity at times to use 'values' language to communicate in the currency of our time, it is important to recognise the limits and problems associated with this language, particularly the intrinsically subjective nature of the language that undercuts the notion of authority. In the corporate and business context, Mark Scott notes, "The managerial literature is increasingly full of this elusive, chimeral term 'values'. Firms are exhorted to identify their core values, enshrine them on lists and emblazon them daily on screen-savers. The feeling at the back of even the

we often assume are neutral (supposedly needing only to be infused with the right motives or legitimated by correct beliefs) must be open to radical critique. Eugene Peterson agrees: “Pastors”—and, I would add, all Christian leaders—“are the persons in the church communities who repeat and insist on these kingdom realities against the world appearances, and who therefore must be apocalyptic.”¹⁴ (Christian leadership does not necessarily mean ‘church leadership’.)

Christian leaders therefore must have a visionary dimension that is shaped by the eschatological work of God, with an imagination fired by the transformative vision of the kingdom, aiming to shape their own life and those within their sphere of influence—a new form of *common* life. This is a crucial difference between leading with vision and simply managing structures and processes. While management is especially concerned with maintenance and the procedural, leadership is concerned with development, growth and transformation—and sometimes this may require a radical re-imagining of ethos, mission, practices and structures such that the new way of the kingdom can be better embodied in common life. As Banks and Ledbetter insist, “For leadership to endure, it must be intertwined with hope – hope in the sense of looking forward to the future with expectation.”¹⁵ Yet this hope must be lived out in a particular context and situation, within a particular vocation. Hence, “if leadership has a future, leaders must be able to articulate, find, and live out their own sense of hope. Hope grows... stronger and becomes contagious in the context of shared hope within a community.”¹⁶

In summary, our first criterion for Christian leadership, understood as influence, is the practice of *pioneering a form of common life that is in conformity with the new creation*.

2. If I Am a Leader, What Example Do I Set?: Christology and Character

Yet what does this inaugurated eschatological order look like in the present time under the conditions of a sinful age? How should this order be brought about? Are all *means* valid to further the *ends* of the kingdom of God, including all ‘leadership’ means? Means and ends

most receptive senior manager’s mind must be cynicism... The term ‘values’ is a hopeless simplification of a complex reality. Identifying values is an entirely inadequate way to describe the complexity of a moral framework” (Mark C. Scott, *Reinspiring the Corporation: The Seven Seminal Paths to Corporate Greatness* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), pp. 100-101). For theological and philosophical critique, see McClendon, Jr., *Ethics*, Stanley M. Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), and James C. Edwards, *The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in an Age of Normal Nihilism* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996)

¹⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 41.

¹⁵ Banks and Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership*, p. 130.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

cannot be separated since the shape and *character* of a whole life is important under the all-embracing kingdom. This is clearly the case when one takes a Christological view of human life: Jesus as the paradigmatic human being was only able to accomplish what God required by embracing a particular form of life that not only affirmed the will and purpose of God but also consisted in a refusal to take on the expectations and practices of this age. Only in accepting this form of life and refusing the alternatives was he vindicated through resurrection and entrance into God's new creation. Here then is the Christian leader's paradigmatic example (Phil 2:5-11, 3:10-4:1).¹⁷

Jesus' own life faced the greatest temptations of leadership as he made carved out his distinctive way of messianic leadership. Theologians such as John Howard Yoder, N. T. Wright and Henri Nouwen have, in their own distinctive ways, highlighted the character of these temptations in terms of chasing relevance, being spectacular, seeking popularity, and seizing power.¹⁸ These temptations are highly relevant to any discussion of leadership as influence. Aside from the particular aims we have in influencing others, the manner in which we go about this influence is highly significant and error here can compromise the witness to and influence of the character of the kingdom of God.

While Jesus clearly exercised a form of commanding leadership as a prophet to Israel and, so, often as an outsider to the normal places of influence, he also trained and disciplined twelve men in particular as well as teaching other men and women. The most profound and startling examples of Jesus way of relating to those who followed him was with the character of *voluntary servanthood*: "But I am among you as one who serves." However Edward Zaragoza believes that many Christian leadership thinkers confuse 'servanthood' with 'servant leadership' which, he holds, is different: the former modelled by Jesus, the latter being focused upon an individual and his or her service and actually power-centred.¹⁹ Jesus provides the model for voluntary servanthood as a form of character yet he refers to his

¹⁷ "Christians look to Jesus as an example of leadership and to the early Christian communities as places of exemplary participation. The narratives about Jesus provide models for life-giving governance, but often in surprising ways. The practices of governance Jesus commended did not match the prevailing versions and evidently were not supposed to. Rather than shaping his followers into the usual hierarchy of power, Jesus constituted his community around power turned upside down": Larry L. Rasmussen, "Shaping Communities" in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), p. 123.

¹⁸ See Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989), N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God. Christian Origins and the Question of God. Vol. 2* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), and John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*. 2nd ed. (Carlisle: Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994)

¹⁹ For a critique of Greenleaf's model and its appropriation by pastoral and practical theology, see Edward C. Zaragoza, *No Longer Servants, but Friends: A Theology of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999)

disciples following his act of washing their feet as “no longer servants but friends” (John 15:16). Voluntary servanthood is therefore not another encoding of dependency-forming power as Greenleaf’s ‘servant leadership’ could possibly become but rather the readiness to sacrificially seek the good of others.

Jesus’ way of leadership was grounded in the character of the kingdom of God and Jesus was fully committed seeing this kingdom embodied in a faithful way. This regularly meant that he overturned expectations and pressure from others to realise his mission in alternative ways. In this respect he refused to be ‘normal’. His dependence was upon God as he meditated upon the Scriptures and communed with his Heavenly Father in prayer, discerning his vocation and its realisation with integrity—a vocation that entailed suffering servanthood and the refusal to meet evil with evil, or violence with violence, leading to a cross.

So, in summary, our first and second criteria combined for Christian leadership, understood as influence, are the practice of *pioneering and charting, with a Christ-like character, a form of common life that is in conformity with the new creation.*

3. If I Am a Leader, Who is Following?: Ecclesiology and Community Collaboration

The life of Jesus is on the one hand unique and unrepeatable: he has represented humankind before God in his life, death, resurrection and ascension in a complete and decisive way. However, conformity to the cross of Jesus is the example to which we are called across the New Testament.²⁰ Yet this is not in splendid isolation. *Leadership assumes relationship* yet there are different kinds of relationship; there are ‘near and far’ neighbours, as Karl Barth once expressed it, and both the obligation and ability to influence others depends somewhat upon the kind of relationships we find ourselves in.

There are certain forms of Christian leadership that can influence from afar: so, for example, a prominent Christian whose published teaching or biography inspires action from others or else provides a resource for other Christians’ actions. However the predominant mode of leadership that most if not all are called to aspire to is within the community of disciples who are together indwelt by God’s Spirit in their gathered and ‘scattered’ life. It is as members of the one body of Christ that we are trained in a new form of life that is rooted in the example and achievement of Jesus. The Christian community, when it functions well, is to persevere with the transformative social practices that the gospel of Jesus entails rather than settle for pragmatic techniques. These include such practices as *binding and loosing* (as moral

²⁰ See Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* and Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins; Edin-burgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996)

discernment, deliberation and discipline), *baptism* as initiation into way of Jesus and into his community, the *table* of genuine fellowship and mutuality, the *open meeting* and the exercise of the *diversity of 'gifts'*.²¹ This last commitment to the expression of ministry by all the members of the community is important for considering leadership. Christian leadership can be both a form of character influence along with training in certain skills and also a particular role within a community. There are particular leadership positions of community representation, authority and governance such as eldership. However leadership not only relates to these particular governance roles but the authority that comes from being a skilled exemplar of a particular ministry. Thus people can express leadership in hospitality, generosity, encouragement, teaching, and so forth, according to the 'grace' given to them (Rom. 12:3-8).

So, in summary, our first, second and third criteria combined for Christian leadership, understood as influence, are the practice of *pioneering and charting, with a Christ-like character, a form of common life that is in conformity with the new creation and enabling others to follow the same example in their distinctive ways.*

Leadership as the Vocation of Christian Influence

We have set out a framework to speak about the goals, character and participants in Christian influence and thus to affirm in a slightly more nuanced way the contention of Walter Wright that Christian leadership is the ability to influence others. It is not enough to speak of leadership as a "relationship of service [that] begins in relationship with God and leads out of the strength of that relationship"²² as though spiritual disciplines—though necessary—were the heart of Christian leadership and influence. Rather, we need to see Christian influence as the melding together of a vision of God's cosmic salvific purpose as well as the virtues of Christ worked out in an embodied and thoroughly historical way in his variously-gifted people through a Christian *phronesis* or practical wisdom. Personal depth and spirituality must be set in this context in order to understand what Christian influence might look like lest we turn inward and miss the missional vocation of God's people: the outward mission must set the context for our 'inwardness'. As Willimon says, we "must be called, recalled to the joy of being grasped by something greater than ourselves, namely our vocation to speak and to enact the

²¹ See John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World*. (1992; Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2001) and "Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture" in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994) for an excellent account of these practices. See also Arne Rasmusson, *The Church as Polis: From Political Theology to Theological Politics as Exemplified by Jürgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995)

²² Walter C. Wright, *Relational Leadership: A Biblical Model for Influence and Service* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000)

Word of God among God's people."²³ Only with such a vision lived out in a radical disciple community can we hope to see a Christian influence as was sought by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his inspirational yet tragic experience in Nazi Germany:

He intended to share with others this experience, with its joys and trials, its mutual support and enduring friendships, that it might serve as a model for forming moral leaders and for the creation of new forms of church community throughout Germany. With vivid memories of how he and his seminarians were able to form a supportive community for each other in Finkenwalde, he wrote that what they accomplished could become a possibility for the church as a whole. In fact, it was entirely possible, he said, for the creation of communities like these to become a bona fide "mission entrusted to the church." In depicting that community in *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer also acknowledged the urgent need for the church to discover new and different ways to be the church. He thus emphasized the courageous following of Jesus Christ within a genuine community formed along the lines of the gospel, not the typical kind of church gatherings where strangers met and remained strangers, and whose dull blandness offered little resistance to the political ideology that had successfully gained the allegiance of most churchgoers.²⁴

²³ William H. Willimon, *Calling and Character: Virtues of the Ordained Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), p. 25.

²⁴ Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, *The Cost of Moral Leadership: The Spirituality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 145-146.