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LEADERSHIP IN APOSTOLIC PERSPECTIVE: ACTS 20:18–35

Allan Chapple

The speech to the Ephesian elders provides an important insight into the priorities and practice of the Apostle Paul. In contrast to the worldly ‘CEO’ model of church leadership, this article demonstrates Paul’s commitment to a gospel-centred, servant-hearted ministry of the Word.

A generation ago, Pulitzer Prize-winner James MacGregor Burns observed,

One of the most universal cravings of our time is a hunger for compelling and creative leadership.¹

If anything, this is even truer now than it was then—and it is just as pressing in the church as it is in the wider society:

It may well be that there is no more urgent challenge facing the church today than identifying, preparing, calling, authorizing, supporting, and encouraging faithful and capable leaders.²

It has also become obvious that this craving to experience authentic leadership is matched by another: namely, the deep desire on the part of many pastors to exercise such leadership in the local church. We see this reflected in the way leadership textbooks have been pouring off the presses, both secular and Christian, and in the proliferation of leadership seminars and conferences.

These developments have not pleased everyone. Some warning voices are attempting to make themselves heard, and they have serious charges to level. Prominent among them is theologian David Wells. Two decades ago he protested at what he called the ‘professionalization of the ministry’—a trend which he characterised as follows:

¹ James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2010 [1978]), p. 1.

² Anthony B. Robinson & Robert W. Wall, *Called to Be Church: The Book of Acts for a New Day* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006), p. 236.

the central function of the pastor has changed from that of a truth broker to manager of the small enterprises we call churches.³

Wells continued this protest in his next book, in which he noted the promotion of a new paradigm of ministry:

The modern pastor...must be an efficient manager or, perhaps more to the point, a capable C.E.O.⁴

In a more recent book, he sees no reason to diminish his warnings about the dangers of this trend:

We turn to structures and programs, appearances and management, advertising and marketing. Our preoccupation is with what we *do* and therefore with what we *control*...What is of primary importance in a technological world is technique, for that, after all, is how we manage everything else. In the kingdom of God things are different...Being mastered by God is infinitely more important than having the know-how to manage the church.⁵

It is hard to deny that Wells and others like him⁶ have a serious point—but equally, it is difficult to dismiss all of the current focus on leadership

³ David Wells, *No Place for Truth, or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 13. The relevant section of the book is Chapter VI: The New Disablers (pp. 218–257).

⁴ David Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Leicester: IVP, 1994), p. 73.

⁵ David Wells, *The Courage to be Protestant: Truth-Lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 247 (italics orig.).

⁶ One example of many which could be cited is Brian Dodd's *cri de coeur*:

[The] lack of a divine reference point is all too obvious in the burgeoning market of leadership books and seminars. We have hungered after the world's wisdom and stuffed ourselves on secular practices, techniques and buzzwords...This trend to rely on secular leadership strategies, to equate ministry with management, has affected and infected the thinking of almost an entire generation of Christian leaders...as a pastor, I fell into no shortage of leadership seminars, books and tapes—Christian and otherwise. They dazzled and excited me...But many, if not most, Christian leadership books today are hardly Christian apart from proof-texting use of Scripture and application to church life. Distinctively Christian hallmarks of leadership found in the Bible are all but absent most of the time in popular Christian literature: the cross, self-sacrificial servanthood, love and gentleness, Spirit-led and Spirit-powered

as simply worldly or irrelevant. In a volume intended to bring the church to the point of ‘breaking with the idols of our age,’ Os Guinness addresses this matter with commendable balance:

The managerial revolution...could provide the church with a large, varied, and powerful toolbox...If Christians would use the best fruits of the managerial revolution constructively and critically, accompanied by a parallel reformation of truth and theology, the potential for the gospel would be incalculable.⁷

This is surely the right approach—but note how it makes everything dependent on whether we are able to sustain the necessary ‘reformation of truth and theology.’ How are we to do so? It should be obvious that the only way forward here is a constant return to the Bible, without which we are bound to lose our hold upon the truth and to cease reforming our theology and practice. It is the Bible that must shape our convictions about ministry and our conduct in ministry—for if the Bible doesn’t, the world around us will. Our boundaries are porous, and we are in constant danger of infiltration by what the world has on offer. But when the Bible gives us so much to choose from,⁸ where shall we begin?

To learn about leadership in and of the church, Paul’s address to the elders of the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:18–35) is an obvious place to go.⁹ Here he reflects on his own leadership (verses 18–27, 33–35) in order

ministry through weak vessels, prayer, suffering, and the like...What was striking about Paul’s leadership was not the ways that it reflected the effective leadership style of the people in his day. In fact, what was so impressive was the uniquely Christ-centered and cross-reflecting style of leadership that he exhibited.

Brian J. Dodd, *Empowered Church Leadership: Ministry in the Spirit according to Paul* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), pp. 11, 13, 14.

⁷ Os Guinness, ‘Sounding Out the Idols of Church Growth’ in *No God But God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age* (Os Guinness & John Seel, eds.; Chicago: Moody, 1992), pp. 151–174 (at p. 154).

⁸ Good examples of how much relevant material there is in Scripture are provided by Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible* (NSBT 20; Leicester: Apollos/Downers Grove: IVP, 2006) and Derek Tidball, *Ministry by the Book: New Testament Patterns for Pastoral Leadership* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008).

⁹ Although it employs Lucan vocabulary and serves the wider objectives of his narrative, the wording and themes of the speech are also in tune with the Paul of the letters: see especially Steve Walton, *Leadership and Lifestyle: The Portrait of Paul in the Miletus Speech and 1 Thessalonians* (SNTSMS 108; Cambridge: CUP,

to prepare the elders for the new situation in which they will now be exercising theirs (verses 28–32). But what example has he set for them?¹⁰ How does he characterise his leadership—and theirs? With this snapshot to guide us, what is leadership when viewed from an apostolic perspective?¹¹

The Heart of Leadership

Paul's fundamental answer—the one from which all the others spring—is that he was 'serving the Lord' (verse 19) in Ephesus. In one way, this speaks of his distinctiveness as an apostle: he is Christ's slave,¹² because the Lord 'arrested' him (Philippians 3:12) and brought him into his service (verse 24). Yet there is a sense in which all believers are Christ's slaves, for he is the Lord to whom all now belong and whom all are to serve.¹³ Although there are many ways of serving, no Christian is ever more than a slave—not even an apostle! That is why Paul specifies that he served

2000); see also Jacques Dupont, OSB, *Le Discours de Milet: Testament Pastoral de Saint Paul (Actes 20, 18–36)* (Lectio Divina 32; Paris: Cerf, 1962), pp. 26–30; Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 177–196; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), pp. 610–611, 615–616, 627.

¹⁰ '[A] key aim of Paul's address is the presentation of a model of leadership for imitation...' (Walton, *Leadership*, p. 200; cf. pp. 84–86; 134–136). Although widely held, this view has been challenged by Beverley Roberts Gaventa ('Theology and Ecclesiology in the Miletus Speech: Reflections on Content and Context,' NTS 50.1 (2004), pp. 36–52). She argues that Paul 'does not present himself as an independent leader to be emulated' (p. 46) and that 'the real actors' responsible for the church are not the elders but 'the characters of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit' (p. 48). That this involves an unnecessary disjunction can be seen as soon as we ask how God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit do their church-generating, church-sustaining work. It is clear that they use means, most notably the work Paul has done and now the leadership to be exercised by the elders. It is true that there would be no church without the work of 'the real actors'—but it is also true that the church is to be shepherded by the 'overseers' (verse 28), whose role is clearly secondary but no less real than that of the primary actors. It is a matter of both/and, not either/or as Gaventa implies.

¹¹ It is obviously not possible to provide a detailed study of the speech here (for which, see especially Dupont, *Discours*). Rather, our aim is to discern what it reveals about the primary features of leadership in the local church. While it does not cover everything, what it does say goes to the heart of this subject.

¹² See Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:10; Philippians 1:1; cf. Titus 1:1.

¹³ See Romans 14:18; 1 Corinthians 7:22; Ephesians 6:6; Colossians 3:24; cf. Romans 6:16, 22.

with humility (verse 19). In setting an example, he was also following an example: that given by the Lord himself.¹⁴

The mark of the true servant of God is a towel and not a scepter. He serves Christ by serving his people.¹⁵

There is therefore no place in the church for the hubris that turns leadership into an assertion of personal charisma or institutional power. Leadership that is authentically Christian is not first and foremost a display of power or control, for it is not about reaching the top and staying there. Nor is it primarily an exercise of authority, for it begins and always remains under the authority of the only *κύριος* of the church, the Lord Jesus. Rather, the essential character of Christian leadership is humble service. We must never forget that we are servants of the Lord who said, 'I am among you as one who serves' (Luke 22:27).

This approach to leadership goes hand-in-hand with Paul's perception of the church. This becomes evident in verse 28, which constitutes the centre and crux of his speech.¹⁶ Here we see that the church has trinitarian roots.¹⁷ First and foremost, it is God's church, the assembly that belongs

¹⁴ Note especially Mark 10:42–45; Luke 22:24–27; John 13:1–17. It is clear from Phil 2:5–8 that Paul knew about this example and regarded it as of fundamental importance.

¹⁵ Warren W. Wiersbe & David W. Wiersbe, *Ten Power Principles for Christian Service* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), p. 36.

¹⁶ Numerous proposals have been made about the structure of this speech. The most convincing in my judgment is the chiasmus detected by Philippe Bossuyt, SJ & Jean Radermakers, SJ, *Témoins de la Parole de la Grâce: Lecture des Actes des Apôtres, 2. Lecture continue* (Brussels: IET, 1995), pp. 599–601. Verse 28 is the centre of this chiasmic structure, in which verses 18–21 and verses 33–35 are a recall of the past, verses 22–24 and verse 32 deal with the present, and verses 25–27 and verses 29–31 anticipate the future. Although he sees the structure differently, C.K. Barrett regards verse 28 as 'both the practical and the theological centre of the speech' (*The Acts of the Apostles, Volume II* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 974).

¹⁷ See Bossuyt & Radermakers, *Témoins*, pp. 604, 606–607; Ling Cheng, *The Characterisation of God in Acts: The Indirect Portrayal of an Invisible Character* (PBM; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2011), pp. 122–123; Dupont, *Discours*, pp. 150–157; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 680; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), p. 865; Josef Zmijewski, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (RNT; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1994), p. 749.

to him.¹⁸ He has made it his own at great cost to himself, having secured it by the blood of his very own one.¹⁹ Its life is shaped by the Spirit, who has appointed them as overseers. Paul does not need to elaborate on any of this, for these are foundational truths that the elders have already learned from him. Yet the implications are profound and far-reaching. One of the most important lies in Paul's choice of preposition: the Spirit has made them overseers 'in' the flock, not 'over' it.²⁰ Those who are to shepherd the flock are sheep themselves! To use the more common family-image, those whom we lead are our brothers and sisters. It is therefore essential that the character of our leadership matches its context—the nature of the church must govern the nature of its leadership. So what kind of leadership should be exercised among us? As we have seen, Paul regards humble service (verse 19) as the only appropriate stance for those whose calling is to lead the God-owned, blood-bought, Spirit-directed community that is the church (verse 28). Bonhoeffer makes the point this way:

Pastoral authority can be attained only by the servant of Jesus who seeks no power of his own, who himself is a brother among brothers submitted to the authority of the Word.²¹

So no one serves as an owner or ruler; no one stands over and above the church; no one has an intrinsic right to exercise control—for the church is not ours to own or rule. Yet there is authority in Christian leadership—but it is the authority of those who live under that of the church's only Lord, the Lord Jesus. So it is an authority that is dependent and not inherent; it is exercised in self-giving not in self-assertion; it is aimed at the good of those who are served and not the glory of those who serve. It is seen in humble service, exercised 'in' the church, not 'over' the church.²²

¹⁸ For this reading, see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2d. ed., Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), pp. 425–427.

¹⁹ For good discussions of the textual variants and translation options here, with reference to other significant discussions, see Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), pp. 136–141; Walton, *Leadership*, pp. 95–98.

²⁰ See Zmijewski, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 750.

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM, 1954), p. 85.

²² See Schnabel, *Acts*, pp. 862–864.

The Instrument of Leadership

How has Paul been engaged in this kind of service? Here too he gives one fundamental answer from which all the others spring: he serves by testifying to the gospel of God's grace (verse 24). In this way Paul makes it clear that the gospel—the word of grace (verse 32)—is at the centre of his ministry and of his entire life. It is by his witness to the gospel that he fulfilled the commission given to him by the Lord Jesus (verse 24). It is by his witness to the gospel that he discharged his responsibility for those to whom he is sent (verses 26–27). His leadership is that of one who serves the Lord as a servant of his word. The rest of what Paul says about his ministry of the word focuses especially on how comprehensive and how costly it was. He is here alerting the elders to what their own ministry will and should be like.

His ministry was comprehensive in its *manner*: communicating the word of God involved announcing or declaring (verses 20, 27), teaching (verse 20), testifying (verses 21, 24), heralding (verse 25), and admonishing (verse 31). It was also comprehensive in its *focus*: Paul's message concerned God's grace (verses 24, 32),²³ God's kingdom (verse 25),²⁴ God's purpose—that is, his salvific plan (verse 27).²⁵ So it dealt with

the fulfillment of God's kingdom purposes in the person and work of Jesus Christ, which is the biblical-theological framework within which the gospel was preached.²⁶

And because his message involved the whole of God's purpose (verse 27), his ministry too was comprehensive in its *scope*: it was not only conducted in public places and from house to house (verse 20), but was also directed to both Jews and Gentiles (verse 21).²⁷ It meant caring for all of the flock (verse 28), including the weak (verse 35). Finally, it was comprehensive in its *objectives*: by evangelistic proclamation Paul aimed to elicit a right response to God and the gospel (namely, repentance

²³ See Acts 13:43; 14:3; 15:11; Galatians 1:6; Ephesians 3:2; Colossians 1:6.

²⁴ Note especially Acts 28:23, 31.

²⁵ So Barrett, *Acts*, p. 973; Witherington, *Acts*, p. 622.

²⁶ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (PC; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans/ Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), p. 567 n. 58.

²⁷ "The whole purpose of God" is an understanding of God's purpose of salvation that recognizes its world-embracing dimensions.' (Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation, Volume 2: The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), p. 257).

toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus: verse 21), and by earnest and untiring pastoral admonition he aimed to ensure that every member of the church remained faithful (verse 31).

All of this has something vital to say about the nature of Christian leadership. Most important of all is the fact that the ministry of the word lies at its heart. The Swiss Reformer Heinrich Bullinger saw this very clearly:

the Church cannot possibly spring up or be built up by the decrees and doctrines of men...The doctrines of men set up the churches of men, but Christ's Word builds up the Christian Church...having given teachers to the Church our Lord God founds, builds, maintains and enlarges the Church by his Word and his Word alone.²⁸

The ministry of the word upon which the church depends is wide-reaching, because God's word is comprehensive in its content and scope. So in our context, those who make known the whole purpose of God are

those who expound Scripture faithfully, and from it establish the people in faith, in the fear of the Lord, and in all godly practices.²⁹

This ministry of the word is also focused, because the word is centred upon God's grace (verses 24, 32). No leadership is authentically Christian if it does not magnify the grace of God. What does this mean in practice? First and foremost, it is to magnify the Christ of God—and especially to magnify his cross and resurrection as the heart of all true faith and the key to authentic godliness. Christian leadership is always grace-centred—that is, always Christ-centred, cross-and-resurrection-centred, gospel-centred. Magnifying the grace of God means, secondly, maintaining a steadfast reliance upon the grace of God, not only as the key to salvation but also as the key to service. It means recognising and rejoicing in the sufficiency of grace rather than in the competence of the leader. This means leadership that rests on grace rather than power, that comes not out of personal strength but out of weakness-made-strong.³⁰ Such leadership is not

²⁸ Heinrich Bullinger, 'Of the Holy Catholic Church' in *Zwingli and Bullinger* (G.W. Bromiley, ed.; Library of Christian Classics; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), pp. 307, 309.

²⁹ John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles 14–28* (Calvin's New Testament Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966 [1554]), p. 181.

³⁰ Note how Paul urges Timothy to find his strength in God's grace (2 Tim 2:1). This reflects the surprising lesson Paul himself had had to learn: that weakness does

only based on grace; it also expresses grace. We see this in Paul's tears (verse 31)—tears which speak of his deep commitment to the believers in Ephesus,³¹ and thus of his love for them.³² We also see it in his hard physical work (*κοπιᾶω*, verse 35), which not only funded his ministry but also gave him the resources to help the 'weak.'³³ (We should note here that while the ministry of the word was the heart of Paul's ministry, it was clearly not the whole of it.) With this conduct he cut across one of that society's basic patterns: the principle of reciprocity, in which each benefit entailed an obligation. The support he gave the weak would have been regarded as obligating them to give him loyalty and service as their patron or benefactor.³⁴ But in keeping with the teaching of Jesus, Paul gave this support freely, with no thought of receiving anything in return (verse 35).³⁵ In both his tears and his hard work, then, we see that the

not disqualify us from ministry if we rely on the sufficiency and power of that grace (2 Corinthians 12:7–10).

³¹ See Gottfried Schille, *Die Apostelgeschichte des Lukas* (3d. ed., ThHKNT; Berlin: Evangelische, 1989), p. 404; Zmijewski, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 745.

³² His tears signify his 'careful and compassionate concern' (F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (revised ed., NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 393); cf. Peterson, *Acts*, p. 571; Walton, *Leadership*, p. 132; Witherington, *Acts*, p. 624.

³³ In other Pauline contexts, this term refers to those who do not have a robust grasp of the implications of the gospel (Romans 14:1–2; 1 Corinthians 8:9–13), but the context here points to members of the church who lacked the needed resources (health? employment?) to provide adequately for themselves.

³⁴ On the principle of reciprocity, see Stephan Joubert, *Paul as Benefactor: Reciprocity, Strategy and Theological Reflection in Paul's Collection* (WUNT 2.124; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), pp. 69–72. On the debate as to whether patronage or benefaction is the better understanding of the cultural background, see Bruce A. Lowe, 'Paul, Patronage and Benefaction: A 'Semiotic' Reconsideration' in *Paul and his Social Relations* (Stanley E. Porter and Christopher D. Land, eds.; Pauline Studies 7; Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 57–84.

³⁵ See Brian Capper, 'Reciprocity and the Ethic of Acts' in I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, eds., *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 499–518 (at p. 518); Schnabel, *Acts*, p. 852; Witherington, *Acts*, p. 626. Paul's stance here is decidedly counter-cultural: 'Graeco-Roman benefactors generally used their benefactions to increase their own honour, and not so much to alleviate the wants of others.' (Joubert, *Benefactor*, p. 217). His conduct was part of what amounted to a 'revolution of social values' (E.A. Judge, 'Cultural Conformity and Innovation in Paul: Some Clues from Contemporary Documents' in *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays by E.A. Judge* (David M. Scholer, ed.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2008), pp. 157–174 (at p. 173)), in which he subverted the system of patronage and its *quid pro quo* character (Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of*

grace which is his message also shapes and fills his ministry. In this, too, his ministry was a model for that of the elders.

The Cost of Leadership

In addition to reminding the elders how comprehensive it was, Paul also indicates that his ministry of the word was costly. There were two senses in which this was true: it meant enduring opposition and it involved swimming against the cultural stream. Paul's witness to the gospel generated strenuous opposition, strong enough to bring him to tears (verse 19).³⁶ But these trials have not silenced him—and even though their intensity is about to increase (verse 23), he has set himself to continue bearing witness to the gospel of grace regardless of the cost (verse 24). Although opposition has come and will continue to come, Paul is resolved to be steadfast and persevering. He is willing to pay the price of leadership, to serve under the banner of the cross. And the same should also be true of the elders.³⁷

The counter-cultural dimensions of his leadership would also have proved costly for Paul. His commitment to the work of the gospel meant being counter-cultural in three ways in particular—in his humble demeanour and his manual labour, as well as his support of the weak. As to the former: because he was the Lord's slave, Paul served with humility (verse 19). Although believers were taught to see this as a mark of godliness,³⁸ the Graeco-Roman world, caught up in a culture of self-promotion and the pursuit of honour, regarded it as an expression of weakness and of low or servile origins.³⁹ Yet for Paul, such humility is a

Secular Ethics and Social Change (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 184–205).

³⁶ Although some believe that these tears, like those referred to in verse 31, were to do with his care for the believers, the wording of verse 19 most naturally links them with the opposition Paul faced (Walton, *Leadership*, p. 76).

³⁷ See Scott Cunningham, *'Through Many Tribulations': The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts* (JSNTSS 142; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), p. 270; Martin William Mittelstadt, *The Spirit and Suffering in Luke-Acts: Implications for a Pentecostal Pneumatology* (JPTSS 26; London: T&T Clark International, 2004), pp. 126f, 129.

³⁸ See Ephesians 4:2; Philippians 2:3; Colossians 3:12; 1 Peter 5:5; cf. 1 Peter 3:8.

³⁹ See John Dickson, *Humilitas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), pp. 85–95; Walter Grundmann, TDNT, Volume VIII, pp. 1–5; Joseph H. Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi: Carmen Christi as Cursus Pudorum* (SNTSMS 132; Cambridge: CUP, 2005), pp. 34–63; cf. Witherington, *Acts*, p. 616 n. 232.

necessary mark of leadership that is authentically Christian. By serving in this way, however, he risked the disfavour of those who looked for a more assertive and self-confident style of leadership. One notable way in which he expressed humility (and thus risked this disfavour) was in his manual labour, the hard work with which he supported himself and members of his mission-team (verse 34). Here too Paul was swimming against the cultural stream, as there was a marked tendency in Graeco-Roman society to regard manual labour as demeaning.⁴⁰ Ironically, it seems that it was in the church—and especially the church at Corinth—that Paul paid the highest price for his counter-cultural approach to ministry.⁴¹ We too might have to say ‘No’ to the church and not just to the world in order to offer leadership that is properly Christian.

It is clear that Paul took great care to see that his conduct in ministry conformed to his message. He was obviously willing to face the risk of being misunderstood or marginalised because of the ways this put him out of step with the world around him. If there was a price to pay for faithfulness, he was willing to pay it, for he was serving the Lord who held nothing back, paying for the church with his blood (verse 28). What we learn from Paul here is that Christian leadership means not prestige and privilege but service and sacrifice. It is not an exaggeration to say that our leadership is authentic only when it is cruciform. As Calvin observes, Paul’s reflections on his time in Ephesus were a reminder that

he had been among them under the contemptible form of the cross... because he gladly submitted himself to endure the ignominy of the cross of Christ.⁴²

⁴⁰ Note especially the way Paul refers to manual labour as one of the signs of apostolic lowliness (1 Cor 4:9–13). On this see Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), pp. 142–144; cf. Witherington, *Acts*, p. 625f.

⁴¹ As we discover in 2 Corinthians 10:1–13:10, many of the Corinthians much preferred the leadership of the ‘super-apostles’ to that of Paul. His stance on these two issues—and the opposite approach seen in these other leaders: boasting rather than humility, and expecting financial support rather than working to pay their own way—was one of the principal reasons for this preference (2 Corinthians 11:7–11, 18–23; 12:13–15). While there is no direct evidence that Paul faced these problems in Ephesus, it is worth noting that these are the two matters with which his speech begins and ends. Is the emphasis they thus receive a sign that these were issues for at least some in the church in Ephesus?

⁴² Calvin, *Acts*, p. 173.

Christian leadership is not an exercise in triumphalism; it is not about being on top or in control. Instead, it means following Jesus in the way of the cross:

The race is not to the top, where the power and prestige are. The race, for followers of Jesus, is to the bottom where humility, surrender and service are to be found.⁴³

There is legitimate power in this leadership—but it is safe only in the hands of those who are growing down in humility. Only such a leader can be relied upon to use power as a resource for service rather than as a route to greatness.

Confidence in Leadership

Perhaps the most striking feature of Paul's ministry of the word is the conviction that obviously lay at the heart of it: namely, the sufficiency and power of the word of God. We see this as Paul looks back on his ministry in Ephesus. He had not held back from declaring anything that was for their benefit (verse 20). This is not Paul's way of saying that he gave them other useful material along with the word of God! Rather, it is an indication of how wide and comprehensive the gospel message is. Everything that is truly profitable for them—everything that concerns their eternal salvation—is given to them in Paul's message.⁴⁴ We see this again in verse 26 when Paul declares himself to be like a faithful sentry, clear of responsibility for their 'blood.'⁴⁵ How did he fulfil this solemn responsibility for the church? He gives the answer in verse 27: he kept watch over their eternal well-being by declaring and teaching the gospel in which God reveals his will, his whole saving purpose. Paul is clearly confident that the word of God is sufficient to do the work of God in the lives of his people.

The same conviction is evident as Paul looks ahead, as he considers the threats that will come from both inside and outside the church. He knows that 'fierce wolves' will take advantage of his absence to attack the

⁴³ Dodd, *Empowered Church Leadership*, p. 142.

⁴⁴ See Calvin, *Acts*, p. 174; Dupont, *Discours*, pp. 79–80; Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), p. 591.

⁴⁵ On the meaning of this idiom and its biblical background (especially Ezekiel 3:16–21; 33:1–9), see Bossuyt & Radermakers, *Témoins*, p. 603; Dupont, *Discours*, pp. 129–132; Witherington, *Acts*, p. 622.

flock (verse 29) and that some of the elders would prove to be unfaithful, distorting the truth to secure a following for themselves (verse 30). What leadership strategy does he offer in the face of these twin perils? How are the elders to shepherd the flock when these dangers threaten? He has nothing to point to except his own example of earnest pastoral admonition (verse 31). The elders will guard the flock the same way he discharged his responsibility for it: namely, by means of a constant presentation of the gospel, which both reveals (verses 26–27) and advances (verse 32) God's saving purpose. Like Paul, they must place their confidence in the word of God:

To show oneself fainthearted in the face of the demands of pastoral ministry is to show little trust in the divine word whose servants and witnesses we are. It is from the power with which the word is endowed that the elders must expect the fruits of their labours...⁴⁶

As Paul indicates (verse 32), this confidence in the gospel also means confidence in the God whose word it is.

And what about Paul himself? Does he have no strategy of his own for combating the twin perils of external attack and internal apostasy? How will he respond to the fact that all of his hard work risks being undermined and overturned? We find the answer in verse 32, where he entrusts the elders to God and the gospel. This is an especially striking indication of his convictions, in three ways. First, by entrusting them to God, Paul shows that he regards God as the ultimate leader of the church.⁴⁷ As God's work undergirds Paul's own ministry, the elders should be confident that he will also be at work in and through their shepherding of the flock. Because the church belongs to him (verse 28), they can trust him to care for it—and also for them (verse 32). Secondly, one source of the trouble that Paul can see coming is some of the elders themselves—and it is by perverting the gospel (verse 30) that they will cause the problems he foresees. Yet he does not seek to introduce some other defence or remedy in addition to the gospel; it remains the gospel upon which he relies. He is obviously convinced that God does his saving work by and with his word. Thirdly, in this context we might have expected him to say something

⁴⁶ Dupont, *Discours*, p. 284 (my translation).

⁴⁷ See Jacob Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), p. 513f; Michael A. Salmeier, *Restoring the Kingdom: The Role of God as the 'Ordainer of Times and Seasons' in the Acts of the Apostles* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series; Preston: Mosaic, 2011), p. 130.

about entrusting the gospel to the elders—but instead, he entrusts the elders to the gospel! He thus expresses his confidence in the power and sufficiency of God’s word to build them up in the present and so to bring them to glory at the end, giving them their eternal inheritance. So in the face of serious threats, what does Paul do? He looks only to God and his word—not because there is nowhere else he could look, but because he clearly believes that there is nowhere else he should look. And the same goes for these leaders: the future health and security of the church lie not in their personal charisma or their managerial savvy but in their comprehensive and persevering ministry of the word.⁴⁸ Again, Bullinger saw this clearly:

Therefore let us hold that the Church is not built up by man’s decrees, but founded, planted, assembled and built only by the Word of Christ. We add that the Church of God is undoubtedly preserved by the same Word of God...*and that it can never be preserved by any other means.*⁴⁹

Conclusion

It is time to draw our discussion to a close. We have been analysing the model of leadership that Paul sets before the Ephesian elders. His leadership is to provide a pattern for theirs as they face leading the church in his absence. This means that his leadership can also serve as a model for ours. In so doing, it provides us with a template by which to assess the validity of contemporary views of leadership. While there will undoubtedly be much that we can learn from these views, we should not overlook the importance of our discovery that authentic Christian leadership is in many ways radical and counter-cultural. This means that in order to prove faithful, we may well need to imitate Paul in swimming against powerful social and cultural currents. That is because there are non-negotiables in Scripture without which our leadership will simply echo what the world desires and approves.

Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders has alerted us to at least some of these non-negotiables. We have learned that church leaders are servants of the Lord and shepherds of his flock. Authentic Christian leadership is not primarily the exercise of power and authority, but humble service under the authority of the church’s *κύριος*. It is not mostly about organisational

⁴⁸ See Gerhard A. Krodel, *Acts* (ACNT; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), pp. 390–391.

⁴⁹ Bullinger, ‘Of the Holy Catholic Church,’ p. 308 (my italics).

effectiveness or personal strength and charisma; fundamentally, it is a matter of faithful testimony to, reliance on, and exhibition of the grace of God. Its foundation is the work by which Father, Son, and Spirit create and care for the church. Its chief instrument is the powerful and comprehensive gospel, the word of God. Its most important distinctive is that in and through it all we see the pattern of the Servant-Lord, whose service was both lowly and costly.⁵⁰

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⁵⁰ See Rudolf Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte (Apg 13 – 28)* (EKK; Zürich: Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1986), p. 208; Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, Volume 2, pp. 259–260; Walton, *Leadership*, pp.134–136.