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The Crucified Christ: Paul's Vision of Pastoral Ministry

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"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."
(Gal 2:20)

"Accepting our powerlessness and our extreme poverty is an invitation, an urgent appeal to create with others relationships not based on power. Recognizing my weakness, I accept those of others. I can bear them, make them mine in imitation of Christ. Such an attitude transforms our mission, weakness is itself not a virtue, but the expression of a fundamental reality which must constantly be refashioned by faith, hope, and love."¹

Introduction

Parish pastors are the last of the generalist professions; we are called to do a lot of sundry things. Among the top four are lead worship, preach the gospel, teach the faith, and provide pastoral care to our congregations. However, in a longer list of duties one could also include lead the annual stewardship campaign, rake leaves, cut the grass, unclog toilets, entertain parishioners at coffee hour, welcome newcomers, write weekly bulletins and newsletters, chair meetings, raise funds, visit the sick and homebound, encourage the fainthearted, reprove the wayward, hear confessions, return emails and phone calls, as well as baptize, marry, and bury, all of course with a smile and goodwill towards all.

Too often pastors are burdened with so much *administrata* and *minutiae* that they wonder if they are coming or going. According to the New Testament scholar James W. Thompson, the 21st century pastor is supposed to be a combination of Jay Leno, Lee Iacocca, and Dr. Phil,² to which I'd also add John Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and Oprah. Most often parishioners don't know what characteristics they want in their pastor but they do know they want strong leader, a pastor who will preach with verve and bring robust growth to the congregation. They want someone who will grow their church and build buildings, write essays and articles for the local newspaper.

¹ Quoted from a sermon "In my weakness, I find my strength" delivered by Fr. Christian Chesel the abbot of the monks at the Tibhirine monastery in Algeria. Fr. Christian and the other monks were murdered March 26, 1996. The sermon is found in John W. Kiser *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), p. 199. The tragic story of the monks has been made into a movie called *Of Gods and Men* (2010) by Sony Classics, see <http://www.sonyclassics.com/ofgodsandmen/>

² James W. Thompson *Pastoral Ministry According to Paul: A Biblical Vision* (Grand Rapids, Baker Publishing, 2006), 11.

Congregations also prefer pastors on the younger side who are married and have small children and are full of vigor and vitality. While the pastor is busy running around slapping backs, grooming future donors, and sipping tea with the parish sisterhood, the primary *raison d'être* of pastoral care can often go missing. In my first few weeks in my parish someone on the parish council asked, "Father, can you grow our Church?" What the person really meant to ask was, "Can you promise more butts and bucks." I sat there thinking for a moment. If I respond with no my tenure would be very short. If I answered yes and didn't produce, my tenure would also be short. So I gave them a pastoral response: maybe. There was silence. After fourteen years I'm still their pastor so they must have liked my answer.

Leaders and Leadership

When thinking about leaders and leadership, one usually thinks of people with power and authority. In the political realm you may think of people like Abraham Lincoln, Generals George Patton or Douglass MacArthur, Winston Churchill, or Margaret Thatcher—world leaders who bring nations together and cast a wide vision, who are good organizers and speakers; who are bold and brazen. In the technology area one may think of creators, innovators, and thinkers, people like Henry Ford of Ford Motors, Steve Jobs of Apple, or Mark Zuckerberg at Facebook. In the business world you might think of Sam Walton of Walmart or Donald Trump. All of these forged ahead often stepping on other people as they rose through the ranks of Fortune 500 companies. Leaders in business don't get to the top by being nice; they get there through their power, influence, and dominance. As my late father's Thanksgiving dinner prayer often went, "God helps those who helps themselves." Business executives usually help themselves before anything else.

Pastors can easily fall into the trap of this style of leadership. Every year a plethora of management and leadership books are published using Jesus and the Apostle Paul as role models of leaders whose teachings impart worldly wisdom for leaders. The business coach and self-help guru Laurie Beth Jones³ has made a living drawing on Jesus and his ministry, publishing titles such as *Jesus the CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership*⁴ which she soon followed up with *Jesus, Entrepreneur: Using Ancient Wisdom to Launch and Live your Dreams*⁵ and then *Jesus, Life Coach: Learn From the Best*⁶ and *Jesus Career Counselor: How to Find (and Keep) Your Perfect Work*.⁷ She didn't stop there either; she primed that New Testament-Wall Street connection with yet another title, *Jesus, Inc.: The Visionary Path*.⁸ You may laugh and think these titles are cute and trite but what Beth Jones does is cut and paste pearls of wisdom from the gospels to suit her needs, omitting of course any reference to suffering, service, weakness, and the cross.

She is not alone. Similar books by the business guru Ken Blanchard follow the same theme with titles such as *Lead Like Jesus: Lessons From the Greatest Leadership Role Model of All Time*⁹ and Michael Youseff's most recent offering, *The Leadership Style of Jesus: How to Make a Lasting Impact*.¹⁰

³ For more information about Jones and her books visit her website <http://www.lauriebethjones.com>, last accessed October 24, 2013.

⁴ New York: Hyperion, 1996.

⁵ New York: Crown Publishing, 2002.

⁶ Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006.

⁷ New York: Howard Publishing, 2010.

⁸ New York: Crown, 2001.

⁹ Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008.

However, one may ask, why stop with Jesus, why not include the Apostle Paul? Among Ken Blanchard's offerings on Paul are *Called to Lead: Twenty-Six Leadership Lessons From the Life of the Apostle Paul*¹¹ and *Dynamic Spiritual Leadership: Leading Like Paul*.¹² I guess Jesus wasn't dynamic enough. What these and other authors have done, and there are many others,¹³ have turned the New Testament into little more than a self-help book for business leaders, modern day Marcionites, who have no concern for the text but used it for their own purposes.

Thankfully not everyone has fallen into this leadership-Scripture vortex. The Anglican priest and author Justin Anthony-Lewis has called into question the Church's use of leadership in pastoral ministry and has labeled it as a modern day heresy. In his recent book, *You Are the Messiah and I Should Know*¹⁴ Anthony-Lewis outlines several key examples of the heretical notion of leadership drawing the readers attention to the fact that neither Jesus or Paul could be considered leaders today because their lack of ambition, professionalism, rising through the ranks, power, authority, prestige, honor, or heroic activities. According to Lewis, leadership *de facto* requires a split among groups: the have's and the have not's, those who have power and agency and those who do not, the winner versus the loser, and those who have control and those who have not. In actuality both Paul and Jesus could be considered *anti-heroes* because of their very lack of temporal power and authority, or at least power as we think of it today. After all, what modern CEO would be interested in mingling with his or her employees on the lower end of the pay scale, let alone the janitor and cleaning staff? Yet those are the folks that Paul and Jesus seemed to hang around with most of the time: the least, the lost, the forgotten, the widow, the orphan, the blind, and the lame.

However, when one looks to the writings of the Apostle Paul, one does not find such modern notions of leadership as both Blanchard and Beth Jones highlight. Paul's overarching context or vision of pastoral care is nothing less than the crucified Christ, and in the eyes of the world, at least our world, Jesus was a big, fat failure. He would have never risen through the ranks of a Fortune 500 Company let alone serve as the CEO of one. Throughout his entire corpus, Paul identifies with the crucified Lord as a source for his preaching and teaching ministry.

Paul and the Cross

According to the gospel accounts people had a hard time understanding who Jesus was; even his very own disciples questioned, "Who can this be that even winds and waves obey him?" (Mk 4:41), or his fellow villagers, "Isn't this the carpenter's son?" (Mt 13:55). By and large, Jesus's preaching and teaching was rejected in many places, and in the eyes of the Romans, at least, he was hardly a blip on the screen. Yet the Apostle Paul identifies his own ministry with that of Jesus. Paul doesn't seem to be embarrassed by Jesus's failure and weakness but sees it as a source of strength as he reminds the Corinthian and Galatian communities:

¹⁰ Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2013.

¹¹ Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000.

¹² Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 1999.

¹³ Neil Cole, *Journeys to Significance: Charting a Leadership Course from the Life of Paul* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2011); Leo Wiltshire, *Business Leadership Lessons From Paul the Apostle: Tips for Organizational Success of One of History's Greatest Leaders* (Seattle: CreateSpace, 2011); and Theodore Engstrom, *Compassionate Leadership: Rediscovering Jesus' Radical Leadership Style* (Nashville: Regal Books, 2006).

¹⁴ New York: Bloomsbury Publishers, 2013. See also his excellent book on pastoral ministry *If You Meet George Herbert on the Road Kill Him: Re-Thinking Priestly Ministry* (London: Mowbray, 2009).

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.” Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world. For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Cor 1:20-25).

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:20).

Henceforth let no man trouble me; for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. (Gal 6:17)

Paul was well aware that the crucifixion was a shameful, public, and humiliating way to die. It was reserved for the lowest of the low, the criminal, the robber, and the petty thief. Yet this is the way that Yahweh wanted it, as we are reminded by Isaiah in the three suffering servant passages (42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-9). Here Isaiah prophesies about the humiliation, suffering, and the passion of the messiah.

Paul and Weakness

Paul, however, draws inspiration, encouragement and hope from the cross. While the cross is a symbol of weakness he identifies his own weakness with that of the crucified Christ. In his first letter to the Corinthians for example he mentions a “thorn in the flesh” which he asked the Lord to take away from him but three times the Lord said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Then Paul continued, “I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:8-10). Many scholars are unsure of what Paul means by his “thorn in the flesh.” Some think that perhaps, like Moses, Paul had a stuttering problem or that he was small of stature.¹⁵ Towards the end of his second letter to the Corinthians were are given a hint as he quotes some of the common statements from the Corinthian community in his letter, “For they say, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.’ Let such people understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present” (2 Cor 10:10-12).

Whatever his weakness, Paul didn’t seem too bothered by it; actually, he draws on his weakness as a source of strength. Not just once, but four times in 2 Corinthians, Paul highlights his weaknesses:

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not

¹⁵ See Margaret M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation* (HUT 40; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you (2 Cor 4:7-12).

We put no obstacle in any one's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything (2 Cor 6:3-10).

But whatever any one dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I do not lie (2 Cor 11:21-31).

One may ask, why so much focus on weakness especially since 2 Corinthians is not a long letter? For Paul it is not human strength, not human power and prestige or power or authority that is important, but that Jesus was deemed Son of God,¹⁶ King of Israel,¹⁷ Prophet,¹⁸ and Rabbi,¹⁹ and Lord²⁰ over all creation. This Jesus, however, was also beaten, humiliated, mocked, scourged, and crucified, and left for dead. If Paul really means it when he confesses, “It is no I who lives but Christ who lives in me,” then he completely identifies himself with the crucified Lord. He envisions his ministry as a crucified ministry and therefore being a Christ-like type of leadership, rather than worldly leadership, which draws upon human strength, power, bravery, and authority.

When reading Paul we always have to keep in mind his religious, social, and cultural context, too. He preached in the Greco-Roman Empire, an empire that was built by vast military

¹⁶ Mk 1:1 9:7; Mt 14:33; 27:54; Lk 4:41; Jn 1:14; 3:16.

¹⁷ Jn 1:49

¹⁸ Mk 6:1-6; Mt 21:11; Lk 24:19; Jn 6:14

¹⁹ Mk. 9:5; 10:51; Mt 26:25; 26:49; Jn. 1:38; 3:2.

²⁰ Mt 9:28; 17:4; 18:21; Lk 7:6; 10:1; 11:1; and Jn 8:11.

power, an Empire that stretched from Britannia in the north through Gaul and Germania, through North Africa, Egypt, the Sinai, through Palestine, and all the way through Asia Minor. The Roman Empire did not grow by being nice. They got there through heroic efforts of their generals and soldiers. They grew because of their power and dominance. Visual symbols of this power were everywhere. Major cities like Ephesus had statues of Caesar Augustus dressed in his full regalia of a crown and a toga. There were religious symbols, too; shrines, temples and altars to the gods and deities reminded the local citizens that Rome and Rome alone was the source of power. When the Roman military marched into a newly conquered territory they carried banners inscribed with the Latin phrase: *SPQR*, which is a shorthand for *Senatus Populusque Rōmānus*, “the Senate and the People of Rome.” If you lived in the Roman Empire, even in the hinterland, you couldn’t escape the symbols of their power.²¹

Pastor as Servant

If Paul envisions his apostleship and his preaching and teaching ministry through the lens of the cross and if the cross is a symbol of weakness and humility, then the cross should be a vibrant symbol for the pastor as well. Carrying one’s cross means being a servant of servants as we read in two key passages from Mark:

And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? For what can a man give in return for his life? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mk 8:30-38).

And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:36-48).

Mark reminds us that it is through taking up our cross that we are to follow Jesus and Luke adds the word *daily* so that we may never forget that faith is a daily affirmation of discipleship and cross bearing (Lk 9:23). As Anthony-Lewis reminds his readers, “In the social and religious world

²¹ See the various essays in Richard A. Horsely, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1997) and J. Paul Sampley, ed., *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2003).

of the first century Palestine, a disciple would often expect to ‘follow’ his rabbi. Following meant something particular and practical: in rabbinic literature, to follow was an act of the disciple who walks at a respectful distance behind their master.”²² As shepherds, pastors are called to take up our crosses, which also includes carrying our weaknesses too, and follow Christ. God knows we have many weaknesses. Yet we are still called not just to follow, but to serve. One cannot “rule over the Gentiles and lord it over them” but rather, one must serve, be a slave, bound to our Master, who is none other than the crucified Christ. As we hear in the gospels, we cannot serve two masters because we will wind up loving one and hating the other (Mt 6:24).

It’s easy for pastors to fall into clericalism and abuse our pastoral power. We are called to lead congregations and very often the buck stops with us. Parishioners constantly project on us roles of authority. Pastors yield a lot of influence over people’s personal and spiritual lives and if not careful we can do a lot of damage. The recent sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church²³ as well as the recent flagrant financial scandals in the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) among others²⁴ are just two of the many examples where unchecked power caused a lot of damage. A pastor who lives up to the image of a Fortune 500 company or Wall Street executive replete with all its power and privileges that go along with the job is tempting and will eventually lead to one’s destruction, like a millstone tied to one’s neck (Mt 18:6). Early on in my parish ministry I was given some pastoral advice by some well-seasoned clergy that, “You’re the boss. You tell them what to do,” and “Use lots of guilt in your sermons. Guilt will motivate those sheep.” You may snicker at those snide remarks, but I shudder knowing that some clergy do abuse their sheep.

Conclusion

Pastoral ministry is certainly challenging, especially now in the 21st century when we are only an email, tweet, or Facebook message away from our flocks. Pastors are continually under pressure to produce: to produce more members, to produce more profit, to produce more programs. It’s easy to get sucked into a pattern of pastoral ministry that is of this world rather than preparing our parishioners for the world to come. Hopefully we can re-read and re-examine Paul’s letters to embrace the cross of Christ as a sign of weakness and humility, which we know is ultimately a source of strength and ultimately of power.

²² Anthony-Lewis, *You are the Messiah*, 245.

²³ For a general overview see Thomas Plante, *Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: A Decade of Crisis 2002-2012* (New York: Praeger Publishing, 2011).

²⁴ See www.ocanews.org for more information.