

The Trinitarian Nature of Leadership

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One of my growing interests this past year has been in the practical outworking of a Trinitarian theology. Reading Newbigin clued me to the importance of the Trinity for a biblical and sustainable missionality. Writers like Stephen Seamands¹ draw out the importance of the Trinity for Christian ministry. Others, like Jurgen Moltmann,² are looking more at the fundamentals of Trinitarian theology. Still others, like Stanley Grenz, were drawing from Trinitarian thought with application to both anthropology and ecclesiology.³

Inevitably, one has to ask: what does all this mean for Christian leadership? Stephen Seamands offers a clue when he comments that, “Moving churches in the West toward a trinitarian model of church life will involve a major paradigm shift away from our pervasive individualistic ways of thinking.”⁴ Christian leadership models have been similarly individualistic, viewing leadership through the “heroic” lens: Superman, Rambo and the Lone Ranger. Even where leadership teams have been fostered, many cannot conceive of a functioning team that has no human head.⁵

Could it be that our arrival in this place partly explains our tendency to Christomonism? As Douglas John Hall phrased it, “the western tradition especially was always tempted to substitute an undialectical monotheism heavily informed by a christology emphasizing the divinity principle and downplaying Jesus’ true humanity. The result, in the hands of the simplifiers, is what H. Richard Niebuhr rightly named ‘a new unitarianism of the second person of the trinity’- –or, in the plain and oft-repeated slogan of popular evangelicalism, the simple declaration: “Jesus is God.”⁶ Individualist paradigms make us prone to special kinds of theological error. Errors in ontology eventually become errors in ecclesiology, and errors in ecclesial practice cause us to neglect Trinitarian foundations.

Curious as to what others are writing, I began with GOOGLE. Immediately I came up with an article by Mike Gunn as part of the Acts 29 Network: “The Intricacies of Trinitarian Leadership.”⁷ A second article, a little more recent, was penned by Milan Homola, “Unitarian Relational Leadership: The Myth!”⁸

¹ Stephen Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service* (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 2005)

² Jurgen Moltmann, . *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

³ Stanley Grenz. *Theology for the Community of God*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing and Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2000).

⁴ Op Cit. 39.

⁵ In contrast MaryKate Morse new book argues that a community of discernment and direction is possible. MaryKate Morse comes from the Quaker tradition. *Making Room for Leadership*, IVP, 2009. Similarly, leadership coach Margaret Wheatley considers it a limitation of any human system when leadership becomes centralized and decisions flow down while information (hopefully) flows up. See in particular *A Simpler Way*, Berret-Koehler, 1996.

⁶ Douglas John Hall, “Confessing Christ in a Post-Christendom Context.” Address to the 1999 Covenant Conference of the Presbyterian Network, Atlanta, Georgia. November 6, 1999. 4.

⁷ Mike Gunn. “The Intricacies of Trinitarian Leadership.” May 4, 2006. [Online](#)

⁸ Milan Homola. “Unitarian Relational Leadership: The Myth!” February, 2008. [Online](#).

Conditioned by cultural preference, Trinitarian approaches to leadership are not homogeneous. Instead, they follow a classification that parallels biblical anthropology. Mike Gunn takes an approach which is broadly egalitarian, yet retains role distinction. This model of leadership is commonly labeled “first among equals,” and often degenerates into hierarchy under stress. Milan Homola, on the other hand, boldly forges forward into a perichoretic model. Mike describes the Trinitarian connection he sees:

“.. our clear example of this model was found in the godhead itself, co-equals ministering together for the greater glory of their being (God)... I began to question how this worked in real time. Our elder board was co-equal, and had balanced authority, but who was ultimately responsible for key decisions, and the direction the church or the group would take? .. This church (Any group for that matter) needs someone to guide the direction and vision of that group...

“At Harambee, as well as my experience at Mars Hill Church, the elders are co-equal in authority, but they are not co-equal in rank and responsibility. This form of leadership I like to call Trinitarian, because like the godhead, the members are co-equal, and co-eternal, but there is an obvious rank in the midst of it (1 Corinthians 11).

Mike uses a theological category to describe a human structure without doing much theological reflection. His reference here to 1 Cor.11:3 is problematic. “God is the head of Christ.” Mike wants us to read subordination into the eternal being of God rather than as a mystery and function of the Incarnation. At least Mike recognizes that the inner life of God may clue us to the nature of Christian leadership.

Milan Homola’s paper is more interesting, because Milan is making an attempt at genuine theological reflection in connecting the inner life of God and the creation of humankind to the outworking of life in the Body of Christ. Milan actually believes that the *perichoretic* life of the Trinity should be worked out in human communities. It’s a short paper and there is little room for theological work, but it is clear that Milan believes that the *imago Dei* and the inner life of the God should make a difference in the way we live and work together.

After a short discussion on what it means to be human, Milan connects the inner life of God to human community:

Without taking away from the oneness or the distinction, “*perichoresis* preserved both the unity of the one God and the individuality of the Trinitarian persons.” The significance of this discussion is to show that the God who bestows his image upon creation is not an isolated individual, but rather exists communally (John 17).

This is an important starting point for a variety of reasons. First, it hints that since the new community is the goal of redemption (its *telos*), leadership itself is somehow conditioned by the nature of the community God intends. Second, to be human is to possess the divine image and thus have worth. The implication is that human value exists regardless of class, color, function or role. One person is not more valuable than another because they can be seen to be

“leader” or “follower,” or more effective in mission or ministry. Milan quotes Grenz to substantiate this point.

Milan’s second point is that “God sustains” life and community. He sustains this first intrinsically in Godself, and then secondly outwardly in creation and redemption. Milan’s paper breaks down a bit at this point because Milan does not work from the distinction between the economic and social Trinity. As a result, some of the reasoning becomes confused. He quotes Richardson, for example, that the key “is not that Jesus is divine, but that Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit.” While that is a significant point theologically, it could be counted against a Trinitarian outworking of leadership. Exactly what do we draw from the ontology of God, and what from His incarnation? These are distinct “events” and will have different meaning and application. Recognizing this difference will be more defensible theologically and more powerful in its outworking.

To be fair Milan has a particular agenda in this paper: to counter the commodification so common in western ecclesial leadership. Milan’s proposal is to acknowledge three aspects of “effective Trinitarian leadership.”

The first is collaboration with the true and loving leader: the Spirit. The second is humility in the face of overwhelming forces that push for worldly success. The final is an invitational approach to people that honors their unique value while calling them to their communal responsibility.

This isn’t a bad application, but in order to make it and defend it we need to back up and do some theological work.

Perichoresis

Howard Snyder, in *Decoding the Church*, makes the point that all ministry is grounded in the Trinitarian mystery. Ministry is rooted in Spirit-empowered community, not in organizational hierarchy. The Trinity is the opposite of hierarchy.⁹

Snyder raises the ancient concept of *perichoresis* at this point. The concept was birthed by Gregory of Nazianzus and is sometimes pictured as a dance. Clark Pinnock writes that “the metaphor suggests moving around, making room, relating to one another without losing identity... At the heart of this ontology is the mutuality and reciprocity among the Persons.. a circle of loving relationships.”¹⁰ The concept becomes a way of picturing an abundance of love that overflows in self-giving, inviting others into the dance.

*At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is..¹¹*

⁹ Howard Snyder, *Decoding the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2002) 56.

¹⁰ Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 1996) 31.

¹¹ T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton” in *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960) 15.

Trinity and Beginnings

First, let me begin by making an argument based on the eternal nature of God, who has always existed as a community of persons. We begin at the beginning: in Genesis 1. We have the advantage of starting with the first revelation of God to humankind and God's very first act: creation.

In the first chapter of Genesis we read of the making of a unique creature: humankind. There are two startling aspects of this creation: first, creation is done by *Elohim*, (a plural noun) "Let us make man in *our* image..." Second, the creation of this being is in *God's own image and likeness*.

It is not difficult to argue that this is a leaderful act. It demonstrates some of the qualities that dominate leadership literature: decision making, collaboration, innovation, and reflection. But who had priority in creation? The plural and eternal Godhead evidently collaborated in creation. There is no hint of subordination of one person to another. Indeed, the first clause in Peter Senge's definition of leadership could be used here: "Leadership is the capacity of the community to bring forth new realities.."

Trinity and Endings

But if the beginnings of creation and humankind demonstrate something of the nature of God, so do the endings. Creation and redemption are all of one pattern. Lesslie Newbigin writes,

Interpersonal relatedness belongs to the very being of God. Therefore there can be no salvation for human beings except in relatedness. No one can be made whole except by being restored to the wholeness of that being-in-relatedness for which God made us and the world and which is the image of that being-in-relatedness which is the being of God himself. A glimpse of this is given to us in the consecration prayer (John 17) where Jesus prays that those who believe may be made part of the very unity of the divine being, united by that which binds the Father and the Son, which is nothing other than the glory of God.¹²

Applied to leadership, this is an argument from *telos*. God's purpose in redemption is the creation of a new humanity and a new cosmos: *the summing up of all things in Christ* (Eph. 1:10).

Leadership always has purpose, a point to which it is moving. There are two sets of applications we can make here: to systems and organizations, and to relationships. First let's consider systems and organizations.

In too many organizations relationships get rationalized; purpose becomes planning; and meaning is buried by media. But at root what is often happening is the sacrifice of ends in favor of multiplying means. We fail to keep the vision alive in our living relationships and ways of being. We begin in the Spirit but end in the law.

¹² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1995) 70.

When we lose sight of the end point, we get lost in the present means. In effect, we forget who we are when we forget where we are going. We retain procedures, but lose our passion. When we lose a kingdom imagination, we also lose a kingdom ethos.

In formal terms, the *telos* determines the ethos. The ends we envision form us as a people. The culture we create is really determined by how we imagine our future, the future that is really God's gift to us of his kingdom. All kingdom leadership should be *eschatological*. We lead from the future in order to live in the presence of the kingdom.

Second, let's consider human community and relationships.

From a Trinitarian frame, community is both the beginning point and our final destiny. God creates humankind in his image, the fall brings fragmentation and hostility, redemption restores us to right relationship with God, God's creation, and to human community. The point of all Christian leadership is to be part of the restorative process, as Paul phrased it, "speaking the truth in love, we grow up in all things into Him who is the Head, even Christ" (Eph 4:15).

Paul describes this maturing function as the characteristic of a working community. He becomes explicit in the following verse:

Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the outworking of each individual part, causes the growth of the body... (4:16)

Each part must do its work in order for the body to achieve God's purpose. And in distinction to what popular leadership models advise, it is the weaker parts that are more necessary (1 Cor. 12). Brian Walsh warns us that, "Boundaries require categories of in and out and that means boundaries necessarily marginalize."¹³ Popular conceptions of leadership tend to both devalue and disempower the contributions of ordinary people by making distinctions based on secular systems of value.

Trinity, Community and Mission

Douglas John Hall reminds us that, "the ontology of Jerusalem is a relational one: being means being-with; existence is co-existence. Reality is not to be glimpsed through the examination of individual entities or abstract universals but in the between-ness of all that is."¹⁴

It could not be otherwise. The image of *perichoresis* is the "dancing together" of the divine Trinity. This dance is a spontaneous, eternal act of love and "othering," and it overflows in

¹³ In this light see especially the paper by Brian Walsh, "With and Without Boundaries: Christian Homemaking Amidst Postmodern Homelessness." A paper to the Canadian Theological Society, Toronto, 2002. [Online.](#)

¹⁴ Op Cit. 5

mission. Love invites love, toward the end of “uniting all things together in Christ” (Eph. 1:10). Merton writes that, “the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness.”¹⁵

Some writers, notably Moltmann and Holmes, move beyond affirming the *missio Dei* as the action and purpose of God, to affirming that God is missional in Godself.¹⁶ In this view God does not merely have a mission, but is a missionary God. Working from Augustine as well as Barth, Holmes locates the missional activity of God in the immanent (or social) Trinity and not merely in the economic Trinity.

Mission may or may not exist in Godself, but when creation is born so is mission. All leadership must in some sense be “mission-driven,” and that mission must partake of the nature of Godself: loving and othering, with a high degree of reciprocity and mutuality. Mutuality should include mutual submission, as Eph. 5:21, “be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.”

Love and *othering* both exist in Godself. But perhaps a Trinitarian frame for leadership can take a clue from the great commandments: to love God with all our heart, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourself. Leadership should begin in *selfing*. Seng-Kong Tan writes,

God creates and missionizes from his overflowing fullness, freedom and love... It is only in our relation to Christ, the God-man that, by Christ we become what we were created to be, viz. truly human. Moreover, we are also recreated to be “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4), i.e. to participate in God’s divine light, communicable holiness, and relational life through the energies of the Spirit. As holistic self-relation and relation with others proceed from our relation with God, so genuine human missions must arise from true contemplation. Prayer and missions are not in competition. “On the contrary”, according to Jean Daniélou, “mission appears as the self-unfolding of contemplation.”¹⁷

Just as God’s purposes unfold in time from Godself, so mature leadership unfolds from self knowledge. David Benner notes that, “Deep knowing of God and deep knowing of self always develop interactively.”¹⁸ Writing with application to leadership Chris Lowney writes,

Leaders thrive by understanding who they are and what they value, by becoming aware of unhealthy blind spots or weaknesses that can derail them, and by cultivating the habit of continuous self- reflection and learning.

Only the person who knows what he or she wants can pursue it energetically and inspire others to do so... Research increasingly suggests that IQ and technical skills

¹⁵ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962) 297

¹⁶ Stephen R. Holmes, “Trinitarian Missiology: Towards a Theology of God as Missionary.” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*. Vol.8, No.1 (January, 2006) 72-90.

¹⁷ Seng-Kong Tan, “A Trinitarian Ontology of Missions.” *International Review of Missions*, April, 2004.

¹⁸ David G. Benner, *The Gift of Being Yourself* (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 2004) 30.

are far less crucial to leadership success than is mature self-awareness. In other words, the hard evidence points to the critical soft skills that are encompassed by knowing oneself.¹⁹

Beyond and Leadership

If the nature of Godself is community, it makes sense to draw some distinctions between community and *team*. A team is not the same as a community. A team usually has a clearly identified leader and so it retains an element of command and control.

A Trinitarian perspective on leadership must reject hierarchy. Paul's teaching on the interdependent nature of the Body leaves no room for status. The NT teaching on the priesthood of believers aligns with Jesus teaching that, "the greatest among you must be the servant of all." Dee Hock writes,

In the deepest sense, distinction between leaders and followers is meaningless. In every moment of life, we are simultaneously leading and following. There is never a time when our knowledge, judgment and wisdom are not more useful and applicable than that of another. There is never a time when the knowledge, judgment and wisdom of another are not more useful and applicable than ours. At any time that "other" may be superior, subordinate, or peer.²⁰

Where the modern church echoed Reformation doctrine on "the priesthood of believers," cultural forces pushed us *in practice* toward a professional class.²¹ The priesthood remained, with a more friendly face, limiting participation to the few rather than equipping and releasing the many. When the reality of Ephesians 4 is expressed in a community environment, it can be very difficult to tell who is leading. Leaders may be invisible, encouraging, empowering, and equipping as they work alongside others sharing similar tasks.

There are two types of ministry environment. In one environment a team or teams are formed to assist leaders to develop and implement their vision (purpose). In the second environment a community is formed around a shared sense of passion (belonging). In the team environment success is understood as empowering the group to reach agreed goals. In the community environment success is understood as empowering individuals to belong and to reach their God-given potential.

In the team environment roles tend to be set in concrete and leaders are indispensable. In the community environment leaders may be invisible, and leadership roles and functions are often shared. At different times in the life of the community, depending on need and context and the empowerment of the Spirit, various ones take the lead depending on their competencies,

¹⁹ Chris Lowney, *Heroic Leadership* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2003)

²⁰ Dee Hock, *The Art of Chaordic Leadership*. In *Leader to Leader*, No. 15 Winter 2000.

²¹ See Guder et al, *Missional Church*. In "Equipping God's People for Mission" Alan Roxburgh details the recent evolution of the clergy on pp. 196 ff.

deferring to the voice of the Lord. The key qualities in this context are humility and discernment.

In a *perichoretic* take on leadership as process Dwight Friesen observed that, "Leadership is about conversation. Leadership has less to do with the clarity of vision, and much more do to with the quality of conversation.

“How one fosters conversation is everything. Bringing self to the table, creating open space, speaking, naming, surrendering the need to be right, etc. Hidden agendas, unstated vision, passive aggressive needs to control, and rigid categories are just a few of the many ills ready to subvert [a learning] conversation.”²²

Similarly, Mort Ryerson, chairman of Perot Systems, said that the primary task of being a leader is to make sure that the organization knows itself.

“That is, we must realize that our task is to call people together often, so that everyone gains clarity about who we are, who we've just become, who we still want to be. If the organization can stay in a continuous conversation about who it is and who it is becoming, then leaders don't have to undertake the impossible task of trying to hold it all together.”²³

Postmoderns may admit that hierarchy grants the illusion of structural efficiency, but they recognize that the model is from the corporate and technological world. In the biological world, life loves redundancy. *Why not* have fifty pastors in a community of two hundred adults? Peter Senge's definition calls us to a level of shared leadership that evokes a developmental model -- something closer to a family than a corporate structure.

Leaders like Senge are building on the concept of team leadership to look for more open models. Some like the metaphor of air traffic controller (ATC). An ATC doesn't fly the airplane, he only establishes safe paths for flight and coordinates their interaction once airborne. The ATC is almost an invisible part of the process, but his or her role is essential in enabling the flight. Others prefer the metaphor of symphony conductor.

"A good conductor does not merely tell everyone what to do; rather he helps everyone to hear what is so. For this he is not primarily a telling but a listening individual: even while

²² From the blog at <http://dwrightfriesen.blog.com> June, 2005 . Note also that German sociologist Niklas Luhmann describes human community as “a network of conversations.” From this perspective the best way to nurture community is to facilitate and sustain conversations. Organizational analysts Brown and Isaacs asked effective leaders to describe quality conversations. The characteristics were listed as * a sense of mutual respect * taking time to talk and reflect on what is really important * listened even when there were differences * accepted and not judged by the others in the conversation * exploring questions that mattered * developing a shared meaning that wasn't originally there.

²³ Quoted in Margaret Wheatley, “Goodbye Command and Control,” in *Leader to Leader Magazine*, July 1977. See also Capra, *Creativity and Leadership in Learning Communities*, “The most powerful organizational learning and collective knowledge sharing grows through informal relationships and personal networks -- via working conversations in communities of practice.”

the orchestra is performing loudly he is listening inwardly to silent music. He is not so much commanding as he is obedient."

"The conductor conducts by being conducted. He first hears, feels, loses himself in the silent music; then when he knows what it is he finds a way to help others hear it too. He knows that music is not made people playing instruments, but rather by music playing people."²⁴

Still others like a metaphor borrowed from the philosophical underpinnings of postmodern thought: the narrator. John O'Keefe of GINKWORLD.NET talks about the story:

No matter the story, no matter the ending, truth is in the narrative. All story is valid, all story – both individual and group – can add to the collective of the community. When we see life as simply a collection of story, we start to understand both our humanity and God's divinity. The narrative allows for creative, adaptable, nonlinear thinking with group input and an interactivity based on transparency and a living worldview. The narrative is, if you will, a new operating system for the church in the new millennium. It is both virtual and non-virtual, and it leads us to the future revitalizing the church. Some may view this style of vision development as "vision by chaos," and they would be right. But out of chaos, God creates order.

Many emerging communities eschew titles and labels, recognizing that labels separate people in the community from one another. Labeling a person by their function ("pastor") damages the wholeness of the relationship, and limits the recognition that others may be functioning as pastors in their workplace, or in other webs of connection.

At a deeper level there exists the unspoken assumption that leaders have more to give than others, and that those who "follow" need us more than we need them. In reality, the strong offer one gift, and the weak another. Until we die to the idea that we are somehow "ahead of" or "above" the community of faith around us, we will continue to be frustrated in our attempts to have an authentic community that combines real relationships with real discipleship. Jean Vanier writes,

We do not want two communities—the helpers and the helped; we want one. That is the theory, but in practice there is a tendency for the assistants to make their own community and be satisfied with that. Truly to make community with the poorest and identify with them is harder and demands a death to self.²⁵

And this brings us full circle to the nature of Trinitarian leadership – it is mutual, vulnerable, joyful, and loving, a dance at once mysterious and filled with purpose. May the Lord renew a vision for his perichoretic life to be embodied in living communities.

²⁴ Chaim Potok. *My First 79 Years: Isaac Stern* (Da Capo Press, 2001)

²⁵ Jean Vanier. *Community and Growth* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989) 30.