

Becoming a Leader of No Reputation

by R. Scott Rodin

I have been asked to reflect on my five years in the presidency at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and to do so honestly, I need to begin with a confession. I was wrong. That is the most accurate statement I could make in summing up my experience in this position. Mind you, I was not wrong about everything. In fact, I believe we were quite right and accurate about a lot of things we attempted and accomplished during my tenure. I could make the usual list of 'legacy' items that we former presidents do in justifying our term in office. There is much to be thankful for, many moments to treasure and certainly a legacy that I trust will make a difference to generations of students and faculty at our seminary.

Yet at the very heart of my reflection on my service lies this one major conclusion... I was wrong. I was wrong in my understanding and preconceived notions of leadership in Christian ministry. I was wrong in my expectations of others and myself. And I was wrong in my motivations, which may be the hardest thing to admit.

I look back and wonder why I was so wrong. My career path had certainly prepared me for leadership in an educational setting: 12 years of fundraising experience, a Ph.D. from a leading school in Great Britain, work in educational administration and a knack for strategic planning and vision casting. I had good experience in managing effective teams and working with not-for-profit boards. And my four years at the seminary as VP for Advancement had introduced me to the idiosyncrasies of theological higher education, which I felt I had negotiated quite well. There was no lack of preparation for the task.

Nor was there a lack of motivation. I had long believed that God had gifted me for leadership. I rose naturally and quickly into key leadership positions wherever I had gone.

It felt right, seemed natural and was usually satisfying and challenging. So it was a logical move to take a top spot in theological education.

My problem was not with preparation, motivation, or even with a sense of true calling and a sincere desire to serve God with the best of my skills and abilities. The problem lay solely with my pre-determined understanding of what Christian leadership is really all about.

On my first day in office, if you had asked me for a Scripture that epitomized the leadership ideal, I would likely have pointed you to Nathan's directive to King David, "Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you." (2 Samuel 7:3) I could identify with David as 'God's man at God's time' and I believed that God would pour out his wisdom and favor if I could be such a man. After all, there were kingdoms to conquer and people to be led. There were great things to be done for the Lord and no vision was too limited and no goal too small.

Now, reflecting back on my five years in office, and on the leadership I have witnessed in my years of consulting work, I would point to a different verse. In speaking of Jesus' incarnation, Paul tells us, "he made himself a man of no reputation, taking on the very nature of a servant." (Phil 2:7) The verse does not say that Jesus became a man of bad reputation, or questionable reputation, but simply of 'no' reputation. That is, reputation, image, prestige, prominence, power, and other trappings of leadership were not only devalued, they were purposefully dismissed. Jesus became such a man. Not by default or accident, but by intention and design. And it was only in this form that he could serve, love, give, teach, and yes, lead.

In reflecting on those five years in the president's office, I have come to believe that true Christian leadership is an ongoing, disciplined practice of becoming a person of no reputation, and thus, becoming more like Christ in this unique way. In his reflections on Christian leadership, Henri Nouwen refers to this as resisting the temptation to be relevant. He says, "I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely irrelevant and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her

own vulnerable self."¹ In my past, I have rejected this idea outright. In doing so, I was wrong. Today I see and affirm this important notion that lies at the heart of godly leadership.

I will speak here to five areas where I have begun to learn what it is to be this sort of Christian leader. In each area I found that I began with a misunderstanding of what true Christian leadership looked like, and I have been on a journey of transformation, introducing me to a new way to serve as Christ taught us to serve.

Anointed vs. Appointed

I know of few Christian leaders today who were anointed before they were appointed. We have employed the business model of doing careful searches looking for Christian leaders whom we can appoint to office. We check their credentials, put them through rigorous interviews, and even give them psychological tests before we make the critical appointment. Once in place, we then anoint them and ask God to bless their work.

The Biblical evidence seems to indicate that God selects leaders in the opposite order. Samuel anointed David before appointing him King. The selection criterion for leadership was not based on who would most likely get the appointment, but whom God had anointed for this task. And appointment without anointment always led to disaster.

In 1997, I was satisfied that I had met the criteria for the job and was pleased to be appointed for the position of president. And while our board said a lovely prayer and laid hands on me, in retrospect I think the process was backward. No one asked me if I sensed God's anointing for this position. I don't know what I would have answered, but the issues and criteria to consider in forming an answer to this question were ones that I never considered in my response to my appointment.

The reason that anointing is so critical to the task of Christian leadership lies in its nature as the most unique form of leadership on earth. Christian leadership requires nothing less than a complete, wholesale sell-out of your life in service to God and God

¹ Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (Crossroads: New York, 1996), p. 17.

only. It is the 'losing of your life' to the work God will do in you to benefit your institution, school, church or organization. And the stakes are high. Nowhere else in the Christian life will the price for divided loyalties be so costly for so many for so long. Ineffective and fallen leaders compromise kingdom work, and the effects are eternal. Therefore, it is a field that must be entered with the utmost seriousness, and only when one has clearly been anointed for the task.

With God's anointing comes God's power and presence. There is a special blessing bestowed on God's anointed. It is the blessing of God's power manifest in ways only seen through the work of God's chosen. God's anointed shout and walls fall. They lift their feeble staff and seas part. They speak God's word boldly and movements are begun that free men's souls. God's anointed do the miraculous because they are the servant of the Almighty. There is a unique presence of God in the lives of those God anoints and calls to leadership through that anointing. Without it, we are continually thrown back upon ourselves to make things work. With it, we have the resources of heaven at our disposal if we will be the faithful servant.

For this reason, God's anointed are incredibly unique people. God's anointed will do anything God asks... anything. God's anointed will seek God's will with a passion. They will not move without it and they will not be diverted from their course once they have it. God's anointed will love what God loves and hate what God hates. That means loving God's people, God's church, God's environment, God's resources, and God's plan. It also means hating sin in every form and coming against anything that stands between God's loving plan and its accomplishment. God's anointed are people of keen discernment, they are branches who are solidly engrafted into the true vine. God's anointed are servants first, last and always. And God's anointed have only one passion, to know and do God's will that He might have the glory. In this way, God's anointed are people of no reputation.

I did not come into my leadership position with a clear sense of anointing but I have come to better understand and value the distinction between appointment and anointment.

Fighting the Need to Increase

When John the Baptist saw Jesus walking in his presence, he made the declaration, "He must increase, but I must decrease." Most Christian leaders would say that in their hearts they would wish that Jesus would increase and they would decrease. But it is hard to decrease in a leadership position. There are natural trappings that distinguish those in leadership such as salary, title, prestige, priority, power, influence, honor and advancement. And in each area there are tempting opportunities for increase. There are also pressures to increase and motivations to build a kingdom in which we house our growing collection of leadership trappings. This desire for the fame and fortune of leadership must be met not only by resistance, but, according to John Adams, we must have "a habitual contempt of them."² Nouwen is even more direct,

The way of the Christian leader is not the way of upward mobility in which our world has invested so much, but the way of downward mobility ending on the cross... Here we touch the most important quality of Christian leadership in the future. It is not a leadership of power and control, but a leadership of powerlessness and humility in which the suffering servant of God, Jesus Christ, is made manifest.³

Perhaps the hardest place to decrease is in the influence and the power we hold over people and decisions. For this reason we find Christian leaders who are overly directive at best, and autocratic at worst. And as a result we produce churches and ministries that are rife with 'learned helplessness'. By overestimating our own worth, we help our people depend on us for everything. And that dependence feeds into our need to be needed, to be the "idea person" and visionary, and to be in control. We tell ourselves that the more we lead in this way, the more our leadership is valued and our presence desired.

Of course, this is not real leadership, but a counterfeit that gives us our increase and expands our kingdom. It also, however, does a terrible disservice to our people,

² John Adams, in David McCullough's *John Adams* (Simon and Schuster: New York, 2001), p. 19.

³ Nouwen, pp. 62-63.

leaving them uninvolved and under-developed. It wastes resources and limits our ministry, all under the guise of strong leadership and the use of our God-given talents for 'getting things done.' Robert Greenleaf reminds us that the difference between a true servant-leader who is servant first, and the leader-servant who seeks leadership first, lies in the growth of the people who serve under them. The test question is, "do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?"⁴

For this reason, leadership bent on increasing the leader lacks integrity. Integrity is the attribute of honesty, moral behavior and a value-centered life. Integrity witnesses externally all that we are internally. And for that reason, godly integrity begins with our inner life in God. Stephen Covey sees integrity as, "the value we place on ourselves."⁵ By that he means that we first must keep faith with ourselves if we are to be trusted and trustworthy to those around us. We must keep promises we make to our own value system. For the Christian leader this means that our self-confidence must be founded in our faith in Christ and our desire to be like Him in every way. We must seek to be Christ-like in our inner being and be confident that "He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it." (Philippians 1:6) If Christ is truly living in us, as Paul reminds us, then we can in turn live for others in our work. We will have no need to seek for increase in our positions of power. We will have no desire to build our own kingdoms and advance our own reputations. Our lives are hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3) and therefore it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us (Galatians 2:20). It is only with this kind of godly integrity that we can seek to decrease as Christ increases in and through our work as leaders.

Truly godly leaders empower their people, give away authority, value and involve others, seek the best in and from their people, and constantly seek to lift others up, push others into the limelight, and reward those they lead. All so that God's will might be done

⁴ Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader* (Greenleaf Center: Newton Center, 1970), p. 7.

⁵ Stephen R. Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership* (Fireside: New York, 1990), p. 61.

in a more powerful way. They seek no glory for themselves, but find great joy in seeing others prosper. They take no account of their reputation, but seek that Jesus' face be seen in all they do. Max De Pree's famous definition is worth repeating, "The first responsibility of the leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the leader is a servant."⁶

I have come to understand that godly leadership is a call to a lifestyle of an ever-decreasing thirst for authority, power and influence, where the quest for reputation is replaced by the power of God's anointing.

Being and Doing

I am a doer. I have the reputation of going 100+mph always focused on accomplishing objectives, meeting time-lines and crossing things off my infamous 'to-do' lists. I like results over process, action over deliberation, the tangible over the theoretical. And I like to lead people to accomplish goals and realize vision. What gets in my way are processes, people with 'issues', using time inefficiently, and undertaking work that seems irrelevant. I am committed to transformation, as long as it can get done on schedule and show some real results.

The problem with this style of leadership is that it denies the truth of the gospel and our creation in the image of God. If we are truly made in the imago Dei, then our perception of God will significantly influence our own self-understanding. If we view God as a solitary Monad, an individual being known for his power and transcendence, then we will be leaders who reflect those characteristics. We will be lone rangers, seeking power and focusing on doing. We will see people as means to an end and value the product over the process. We will see relationships as tools for our productivity and community as an asset only when it contributes to the bottom line. This productivity model of leadership is the result of a conception of God as the sovereign, detached monarch. In that image, we lead as monarchs.

⁶ James O'Toole, *Leading Change* (Ballantine Books: New York, 1995), p. 44.

If, however, we are true to our Trinitarian historical commitments, we see instead a God who in his very nature is defined by relationship. We see Father, Son and Holy Spirit as distinct persons yet also interdependent in their perichoretic relationship. The mutual indwelling of the three persons of the Godhead gives us a different understanding of what God values in us and desires from us. Here we learn that relationship is what defines us. We learn that to be God's people we must focus on who we are as people in relationship. We learn that leadership must be concerned with the whole person, and that God's intent is for us to do the work of the kingdom within and through the community of believers.

All of this we come to know from only one place, namely, in the person of Jesus Christ. If our epistemological starting point is solely in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, then our focus as leaders must change drastically. For Jesus was concerned about people over product, relationship over output, and transformation over transaction. And from beginning to end, Jesus was a servant.

We learn from a proper understanding of our creation in the *imago Dei* that what is most important to God is not what we do but who we are. Secular leadership experts are waking to the fact that the key to leadership effectiveness is self-awareness.⁷ In Christian terms this means that the leader is transformed first!

Greenleaf recalls the story of a king who asked Confucius what to do about the large number of thieves. Confucius replied, "If you, sir, were not covetous, although you should reward them to do it, they would not steal." Greenleaf goes on to say, "This advice places an enormous burden on those who are favored by the rules, and it established how old is the notion that the servant views any problem in the world as in here, inside himself, and not out there. And if a flaw in the world is to be remedied, to the servant the process of change starts in here, in the servant, and not out there."⁸

⁷ Among the many authors who are championing the cause of careful self-awareness are James O'Toole, Stephen Covey, Noel Tichy, John Kotter, Peter Block, Warren Bennis, Max DePree, and Peter Drucker.

⁸ Greenleaf, p. 34.

Before God can do a great work in an organization, that work must be done first in the heart of the leader. And again this is especially true in Christian leadership. Unless God has taken our hearts captive, all of our good 'doing' will lack spiritual integrity and authority. Our work will expose the absence of God's anointing. And it is at the exact moment that we think we 'have it all together' that we cease to be useable in the work of the kingdom.

If I could put one Bible verse on the desk of every pastor and every Christian leader in the world it would be this, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8) As Christian leaders we must be engaged in a constant process of self-evaluation and repentance. It is so easy for us to be tempted in a variety of directions, and when we stray, we impact our entire ministry. Godly leaders undertake their work with a deep humility and a keen awareness of their own weaknesses and shortcomings. They know themselves well, seek accountability, pray fervently and watch carefully for red flags and warning signals. Nouwen challenges us to seek this central and defining characteristic of Christian leadership, "The central question [of the heart of Christian leadership] is, are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God's presence, to listen to God's voice, to look at God's beauty, to touch God's incarnate Word, and to taste fully God's infinite goodness?"⁹ For this reason, the greatest tool for effective Christian leadership may be a mirror, and a group of friends to be sure you are looking into it with clarity and focus.

Becoming a leader of no reputation means not being afraid to stare down your weaknesses and uncover the messy stuff in your private world. It means letting God transform you. And more importantly, it means knowing how much you need that transformation, far more than anyone else in your organization. I have come to understand the development of self-awareness and personal transformation as a critical aspect of Christian leadership. When this ongoing transformation is added to the desire

⁹ Nouwen, pp. 29-30.

to decrease while Christ increases, all under the anointing power of the Spirit, the Christian leader begins to emerge.

Leadership is a Miracle

One of the greatest gifts I received during my term as president came from my colleague Ron Sider in the form of a book entitled, "Leadership Prayers" by Richard Kriegbaum. The honesty and humility in these prayers bear witness to the heart of a godly leader. In his prayer for trust, Kriegbaum offers these words,

I love you, God. You know I do. How natural it is to love you. You are perfect. You are beautiful, pure, powerful, absolutely truthful, and kind. You have been so generous to me that just saying thank you seems pitiful sometimes. But far more powerful in my life is knowing and feeling that you love me. You know exactly and completely who I am - all my ugly thoughts, my mangled motivations, my pretending, my irrational fears, my pride, and my unfaithfulness - and you still love me. I know you love me. You know me, and yet, because you love me, you let me lead others. I do not understand it, but I am grateful.¹⁰

In reading these words back through the lenses of my experience I have come to the conclusion that when God uses any of us to lead effectively, it is nothing short of a miracle. When we place the complex and demanding role of a godly leader next to an honest self-awareness of our own sinfulness and incompetence, we are thrown wholly upon the grace of God and his faithfulness if we are ever to lead anyone anywhere.

There is a corollary here to the miracle that occurs in both the efficacy of Scripture and in the effectiveness of our preaching. In both, human words are taken up by the power of the Holy Spirit to become the words of God. In both its inspiration and its interpretation, the words of Scripture are completely reliant on the activity of the Spirit of God. When the Spirit illumines the human word, hearts are changed, people are transformed and God's work is done. The same is true in our preaching. We study and prepare as we are trained to do, but in the end, our preaching only becomes effective

¹⁰Richard Kriegbaum, *Leadership Prayers* (Tyndale House: Wheaton, 1998), p. 22. (italics mine)

when the Spirit of God takes up our feeble human words and uses them to touch hearts and change lives. When it happens it is a miracle!

Conversely, when we seek to have the written words of Scripture or the spoken words of the preacher stand alone apart from the work of the Spirit, our ministry loses its power. It becomes our words, our interpretation, our exegesis and our proclamation. And slowly and naturally into these words of ours will seep the ugly thoughts, mangled motivations, pretending, irrational fears, pride and unfaithfulness of Kriegbaum's prayer.

I have come to learn that we must approach leadership in dependent humility. Throughout history God looked to the least, the weakest, the outcast, the untalented, the sinful and the rejected to give great leadership at historic times. And He hasn't changed that approach today. If we are honest as leaders, we know that we are not capable of leading as the size and complexity of our call demands. We know that there are others more talented, more prepared, more spiritual and more courageous than are we. But great godly leaders have always worked at that miraculous intersection where humility and faith meet the awesome presence and power of God's Spirit. And the miracle of leadership happens. It doesn't mean that we don't prepare ourselves, hone our skills and seek to be the best we can be for the kingdom. What it does mean is that in the end, all that we bring will fall woefully short of what is required, and we will be ever thrown again into the grace and faithfulness of God to work the miracle of leadership in and through and even in spite of our small pile of skills and talents.

When God uses us to lead, and lead effectively, we should fall on our knees in wonder and thanksgiving that we have seen again this miracle worked in our midst. However, it is far too easy for us to take ownership of this miracle and to believe that these results are due to our own wonderful abilities and leadership qualities. If and when we make this subtle yet devastating shift, the efficacy of our leadership for the kingdom is over. We are on our own, cut off from the power and preservation of the Spirit. Every leader finds himself or herself there at some point in their work, and it is a terrifying place to be!

Godly leadership is the miracle of God's use of our earthen vessels for the glorious work of His kingdom. To miss this miraculous aspect of leadership will threaten everything we do as leaders, and our office or study will be the most lonely place on earth. I have come to understand the miracle of godly leadership, and its connection with self-awareness, the need to decrease and the power of God's anointing.

Seeking the Right Applause

A bookmark of mine carries a thought that stayed with me throughout my term as president of Eastern Seminary. It reads, "It doesn't matter if the world knows, or sees or understands, the only applause we are meant to seek is that of nail-scarred hands." Leaders are exposed to opportunities to generate applause. It can come in the form of commendation from the board, approval of our decisions by employees, recognition of our institution's work by constituencies, admiration of our leadership abilities by co-workers, and words of appreciation from students.

As public figures, we receive both the undue criticism for the failures of our institutions, and the unmerited praise for their successes. The true calling of leadership requires us to accept the former and deflect the latter. That is, our job is to take the blame for mistakes made by those under our leadership and to deflect the praise and re-direct it to those most responsible for our success. In this way we keep ourselves in balance, never taking the criticism too personally and not accepting the praise too easily. But this balance is often very difficult to maintain.

One axiom of leadership I have come to appreciate reads, 'leaders do not inflict pain, they bear it'. In the same manner, leaders do not absorb praise, they re-direct it. The success of any Christian leader lies significantly in their ability to keep this two-fold movement of leadership in balance. Leaders who inflict pain lose trust and dishearten their people. Leaders who absorb praise produce resentment and sacrifice motivation.

Returning to where we began, this is why God's anointing is so important to the Christian leader. Only with God's anointing can the leader listen intently for that one source of applause that really matters. Only anointed leaders truly "seek first the

kingdom of God and His righteousness.” If we seek our affirmation elsewhere, the distracting noises that vie for our attention and tug at our hearts for allegiance will drown out all else. And if we seek for this other applause, we will never hear the one from the Master’s hands.

Two significant temptations come to play here. The first is the fear of rejection that causes us to run from confrontation. The second is the desire to make everyone happy and to measure our performance, our effectiveness and our ‘leadership’ on that scale. The two are very closely related. The first temptation is motivated by the idea that good leaders will not generate conflict, and that rejection of our performance in our role as leader is a rejection of our personhood and character. These are significant pitfalls for a leader. They are generated from that deep-seated desire to hear the applause of all with whom we work.

The second temptation is to lead by reacting. We see which way the wind is blowing and steer that direction, regardless of the situation. We do not want our people to be anxious, to question our decisions or disagree with our reasoning. We want harmony and unity, which is commendable. But left unchecked, this desire will cause us to sacrifice courage, vision and risk-taking. It will bring us momentary applause, but will ruin us in the end. To use a variation on a quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Some leaders worry themselves into nameless graves, while here and there some forget themselves into immortality."

So we must ask ourselves just what kind of applause are we seeking? If it is human applause that validates, that affirms and that encourages us, we will also find that same applause binds us, boxes us in and ultimately strangles the life out of us. When our daily self-worth and the measure of our effectiveness come primarily from the reaction of those with whom we work, then we are finished as Christian leaders.

I was always amazed at how many decisions I was called upon to make in any given day; some in private, some in meetings and some in the public arena. Every day there were multiple opportunities to make ‘applause-generating’ decisions. And sometimes the temptations to make them were enormous, especially when considering

the price that would be paid if other alternatives were chosen. However, I was equally amazed at how often God's will and following His word took me down a different path. It is at that intersection between doing what God is telling us to do vs. doing the expedient and popular that true leadership takes place. It is there that we know to whom we are looking for our affirmation.

The goal of the Christian leader must be to go to bed every night with a clear conscience and a right heart with God. God only asks one thing of leaders, that we seek with all our heart to know and do His will.

Before taking on my leadership position I spent a couple of hours with a man whom I respect for his wisdom and leadership abilities. He gave me encouragement and good advice, and before I left he told me something that both inspires and haunts me to this day. He said, "Scott, in whatever you do, always strive to be a man that God can trust." I now believe that a man or woman that God can trust is one who seeks only the applause of nail-scarred hands. It is also one for whom the cultivation of reputation carries no value.

I did not have a clear understanding of this need for balance in the life of a Christian leader, and I have come to see it as an essential component for leadership in the kingdom of God.

Leadership in Transformation

My five years in the presidency is a study in transformation. I came in with a wrong set of expectations, values and ideas about Christian leadership. I was not thirsty for power or obsessed with the trappings of leadership, but I also was not seeking to be leader of no reputation, nor was I responding to the call because I was a servant first. And it was here that I was wrong.

I used to reject the notion that good Christian leaders were only those who were brought kicking and screaming into the position. Or that anyone who 'wanted' to be a president should be automatically disqualified. I still believe that God prepares people for His work, and some aspects of this approach are not in keeping with our giftedness.

However, the truth in this view is that servant leaders are servants first, and only as true servants are they called to lead. For those who see themselves as leaders first, these temptations to stray in leadership are enormous. "The long painful history of the Church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led. Those who resisted this temptation to the end and thereby give us hope are the true saints."¹¹

I have left my years in the presidency with a dramatically transformed understanding of godly leadership, and one that continues to be transformed today. In the end, our work as leaders is all about lordship. Before it is about vision-casting or risk-taking or motivating others or building teams or communicating or strategic planning or public speaking, it is about lordship. Where Jesus is singularly and absolutely lord of our life, we will seek to be like him and him only. That will be our sole calling. We will be called to our work and that work will carry God's anointing. We will be called to decrease that Christ may increase. We will be called to be people of God before and as we do the work of God. We will be called to pray and look for the miracle of leadership that God may work in our midst. And we will be called to strain our ears for that one sweet sound of two nail-scarred hands affirming all that we do in his name.

In these ways, in responding faithfully to this calling and striving after these ideals at the cost of everything else that may tempt us, we become leaders. And as we do, we will be transformed into the likeness of Christ, becoming leaders of no reputation.

¹¹ Nouwen, p. 60.