
CHURCH LEADERSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND TODAY: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID L. BARTLETT

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Abstract: In 1993, David L. Bartlett published *Ministry in the New Testament* in Augsburg's Overtures to Biblical Theology series. Bartlett holds a Ph.D. in New Testament from Yale University; has taught both New Testament and homiletics at the University of Chicago, the Graduate Theological Union, Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Yale Divinity School, and Columbia Theological Seminary. He also served as the Dean of Academic Affairs at the Divinity School at Yale for over a decade. Now, fifteen years after the publication of *Ministry in the New Testament*, this interview with David Bartlett explores several facets of church leadership.

Let's begin with a general question about the book: What is your appraisal of that endeavor, now fifteen years later?

A couple of things: I think the first thing is that I would probably still want to hold its kind of countercultural stress on seeing the value of church leaders as being relative and in some ways relativized by the life of the church itself. That is, when I wrote the book, I was living in a *clericalized* society, and I think I was feeling very much surrounded by people who were taking their ordinations as a sign of special status. I think that's the wrong move, and I haven't lost my anxiety about that move among church leaders. I would say, however, this is probably just autobiographical that in the years since, I taught a course on ministry with one Presbyterian and one Episcopalian and me, and I think I'm aware how much my kind of Baptist free church stuff shapes the way I read the biblical texts. And I think I would learn from my colleagues to come around again, not so much on to the biblical texts alone but to their implications, as on the

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implications to talk about the places where we do need genuine leadership, probably even genuinely ordained leadership for the wellbeing of the church.

The other piece is the practice of leadership material that has come up since I wrote the book. A friend of mine, Efrain Agosto, who is at Hartford Seminary, wrote a book which worked to bring together parts of my book and practice of leadership in ministry. I thought that was very helpful; it brought a practical element to it that my book didn't really have.

That's very helpful. In fact, that leads me into a more specific question, and it's related to the content of the book, but it's also a methodology question. Those who write and teach about church leadership seem to have two main areas from which to draw their theories. The first is, "Let's just go see what the business world is doing," so we'll go get Harvard Business Review, or we'll get a book written by a Stanford business professor, and we'll apply its concepts to the church. The second way is we go to the Bible, and we say, "We see in the Bible this kind of example, mandate, or structure" and apply that to our present-day leadership. Honestly, most people who teach church leadership use some combination of the two. My question is how would you navigate the use of the Bible as a way to think about twenty-first century church leadership?

Let me start by doing an exegetical thing on that that I think is implicit in the book but is maybe clearer in my mind than in the book. When Paul and other early Christian writers were trying to figure out how you understood church leadership, they didn't just draw on scripture. They drew on the language of the world in which they lived. The word for church, *ecclesia*, is really the word for the town meetings held where they lived. Words like *diaconates* and *episcopia* did not come down from heaven but were the common terms used in various kinds of social formations during the time. So I think from the start, we've been in kind of dialogical relationship between the current day's social structures of the so-called world and the models of the Bible. And I think we ought to continue that.

I think it's got to be two things on that: one is, just for all kinds of reasons, we're in a different world from the first-century world, so we can't just be restorationists. We can't simply say let's go back and duplicate the first-century church because we're different in a thousand ways. But, on the other hand—and I think your question hints at your sense of this too—we don't want to simply go out and say, "Okay, what's the latest thing on leadership or fundraising or HR" just as if the Bible had no part in that conversation. On many points, there's a kind of important critique from both sides on that.

An example of this is the conversation about what's "excellence," and it's clear that the Association of Theological Schools, driven partly by Lily money, has now decided we're all supposed to be turning out excellent people. And that's clearly driven in large measure by business models. Hearing this term at a recent faculty meeting, I tried to think where "excellence" comes into the New Testament, and I think confidence and all kinds of things come in. But the only excellence verse I could think of was the end of chapter twelve of 1 Corinthians where Paul says, "I'll show you a more excellent way," and then excellence has to do with agape. And that's a word the church has to keep saying, that leadership has to do with love, with the up-building of community and not always with the kind of strategic goals, charts, and managerial stuff. Now there's my bias.

In the book, I'm looking on page 193, you say that the clearest ministerial function for the New Testament was that of proclamation and teaching. Will you talk a bit about "administration" that makes Paul's list, but is not expounded upon?

Well, administration is certainly there in the Pauline lists in Paul's own letters and in Ephesians, which was either written by Paul or by somebody who knew and loved Paul. So there's a strong sense that that's there—what's so tricky is, you know, that we get these lists of gifts and we can't figure out how they relate to offices. We're not clear whether the administrator was the preacher, was the teacher, or

whether these were three different sets of people. What you don't get is the sense that the same person is CEO, preacher, teacher, and pastoral caregiver of every church. Our sense is that there's one person who's supposed to do all those things. It may be absolutely essential for our context, but I don't think that was happening in the early church. And the one element of leadership that you do see in every piece of early church literature is teaching. The others seem to vary from community to community. Every community, though, has some form of the teacher.

So teaching is universal in leadership. Doesn't mean I don't believe in administration, doesn't mean I don't know that churches need that. I think we have less direct help on that than we do on the teaching—from the New Testament. All the more reason we've got to look at other models to help us and be in dialogue with those.

Would you then argue that, in terms of administration and leadership models, they ought to be more of the core of a seminary education, maybe even required?

Yeah, I think it should be a required course, but I hope that will be done dialogically, too. That is, I hope it wouldn't be now, "Let's forget all the theology and Bible and go straight to Harvard Business School for our next moves." But that it is done in a way that's theologically responsible. Yes, absolutely. Different seminaries will do that curriculum in different ways, whether it's a standalone or part of a larger course. I taught a course at one point with colleagues on ministry for two semesters where preaching, pastoral care, and administration were all included as modules. So I think different schools would do it different ways.

I personally find it interesting that in my experience if administration is offered as an elective course, M.Div. students rarely sign up for it. But when it is offered after graduation in continuing education or at the doctoral level, it fills quickly.

Yes, they all want it; they got it and found out they need it. That's a big piece of it, that a great deal of the reality of

their lives is how do you work as a pastor, how are you a faithful leader in an institution? On the whole, we undervalue that in M.Div. curricula but desperately want it once we get out into the field.

My teacher and friend James Dittes, who taught pastoral care at Yale, was introducing himself to new students, and he said, “Area 4 is the practical ministry courses. These are the courses you’re going to avoid while you’re here and then desperately come back to get after your first call in the ministry.” I thought that was pretty good. It ends up being very important. The other thing—this is related to your earlier question—on the upside and downside of using models for leadership in the New Testament. In the New Testament churches, especially in Paul, the church is still so family-based. In an organizational model, it’s more household than anything else. And that carries with it lots of gifts in a *koinonia* community, but also has a certain kind of hierarchical structure and practice that I don’t think work as well in the twenty-first century as they did in the first. If the church meets in your house, the marbles are yours and you get to call the shots. I think we want to avoid that model today. The household structure also assumes love that we can assume today organizationally. It’s first of all a fellowship and, secondly, an organization, and it’s both those things inevitably. But the foundational language is fellowship-love language, not organization-structure language.

So if we are solely following, say, Max Weber’s bureaucratic structure, the relational love agape really has no appreciative part in it.

Yes, exactly, and it gets very tricky at that point. And I think what any church of more than a hundred people and every denomination struggles with is partly how can you acknowledge the inevitability of the bureaucratic world and yet not toss out the fellowship and the love? ‘Cause it can get lost awfully fast.

I wonder if we like Weber and others, who present organizations in such clear-cut ways, but we also want to confirm it biblically so that we can be good modern-day leaders and faithful.

There's a way in which we try to keep from becoming too ossified by becoming ossified. We try to involve and keep the spirit alive by making more and more rules. And sometimes they're rules—let's be orthodox, let's be biblically based—which end up being counter-spirit, not just counterproductive, but counter-spirit. It's very tough, this complicated thing of recognizing the fact that you have a real institution with real institutional problems and bills to be paid and governments to work with and all that stuff and, yet at the same time, you want to be saying, "We are the body of Christ for the people of God" bound together by something deeper than that but not apart from that.

In the book, you talk about a movement of gospel to church to ministers in the New Testament formation. Is that a helpful roadmap for twenty-first-century church leadership?

Well, I think it might be. In the book, I've got two biases I'm fighting: one is my anxiety about clericalism as if the church were its clergy, and that's the place where I'm obviously looking even at the documents of Vatican II and playing them off against my more Protestant sensibility. I want to argue that the church cannot consist of its hierarchy, even if its hierarchy is just the local pastor. But then my second anxiety is that somehow church exists for the sake of church. That the mission of God in Christ was to bring a church to the world, and I think the church is great and I think it's an instrument of that mission, but it's something broader—it's kingdom or redemption.

Like the temple missing from New Jerusalem, the structural church is a way station along the way to that kingdom and that redemption. But if the movement is from gospel to church to minister, and the church is provisional, then how temporary is the preacher?

Yes, exactly, and it is such a relief. Can you imagine heaven as being a festival of homiletics—the dueling preachers? That would be hell—“and now the Rev. Dr. So and So outshining....”—a place where everybody’s worst fears about preaching self-absorption are realized.

Is there, then, good news in Paul being the last apostle?

I think there’s very good news in Paul being the last apostle. I think Luke and Acts didn’t get that. I think they thought they had to keep apostleship going. And this is my Baptist bias. There are wonderful churches filled with people I dearly love who think that their validity depends on their apostleship. My leftwing Protestant thing is that the apostolic church is the church that preaches the apostolic gospel, and that doesn’t have to do with the way you structure it and that we can re-structure it differently in different generations.

Which, then, is gospel to church to minister. So the church has many manifestations depending on the context, and from that we find leadership and ministerial functions ebbing and flowing.

Ebbing and flowing—it’s shifting and being different from generation to generation. Without apology, without anxiety.

And so is that the way of the interdependence that you talk about, the unity in diversity?

Yeah, it is. That shifting minister, and maybe some shifting in the church, is partly dependent on where you are and who you’re talking to, and the diversity of the canon, which I still love, is a way of saying that there was not this univocal church from the beginning that spoke with one voice and did the same thing. But as far back as you can push it, you’ve got twelve different opinions about Jesus from the twelve people who were following him. And that doesn’t mean there’s not some consensus, but there’re huge diversities, and the canon has said, “That’s all right.” We’ll

canonize that mix and, therefore, all the more reason we can recognize it today. So we shift across centuries, but we also shift across communities.

In my youth, I was very much enamored with the idea of trying to get all the mainline churches together—and deeply depressed that my own denomination only wanted to be an observer, not a participant. But the longer I'm around, I want to sit at the same table on Sunday mornings at the Eucharist or 'The Lord's Supper, and I want us talking to each other, but I'm not really sure I need a structure where we all have the same three orders of ministry or something like that. I think you do it that way and we'll do it this way and as long as we share the same meal (which we don't always do), then I'm happy.

So say a word about sacraments and leadership.

That's where I am heretical. That's where I am unblinkingly heretical. First of all, I'm not an Episcopalian or a Catholic, so there's no way that I can think that somehow ordination actually endows you with some special gift to let you preside over the sacraments; that doesn't work theologically for me, but I've already said diversity is fine, so that doesn't mean we can't be friends and go to church together. When you get into the Baptist, UCC, Presbyterian gang, we all try to talk functionally about it. We talk about the way in which the ordained ministry is useful in the best possible way; that is, it helps us make use of the gifts we have in the church. And I understand that with preaching; I understand that with administration. I have a hard time understanding why if six Christians want to get together and have 'The Lord's Supper, one of them can't say the words and the other receive without checking with the presbytery or board of deacons or board of elders or without having somebody who's gone through seminary say those words. I just don't get that. And I think the church would feel differently if we did that differently. I know two or three churches, such as the Disciples of Christ, that have simply opened up those things to lay people and church feels different to those folk in ways that are pretty healthy.

Talk about charisma, for a moment, particularly in the New Testament.

Well, in the New Testament, it's the language we use for a gift that's given by the Spirit, and it's a whole range of things, including leadership, the ability to preach, the ability to teach, the ability to heal, the ability to provide care, and so forth. More recently, though, for the sociologists it's become more identified with a particular set of gifts around leadership which has to do with being kind of inspiring as the Barack Obama versus Hillary Clinton syndrome. He's the charisma boy, and she's the practical person, and we're watching a debate between whether what we need in this country is charisma or efficiency. But for Paul, Hillary would have had one charisma, and Barack would have had another, but they would both be gifted. You didn't have one charismatic figure. You just had different charismas.

And I wish we could capture some of that again. Recently I had lunch with some laypeople and we talked about the danger of a charismatic preacher and that he or she can become so enamored of him or herself or that people can give them far more authority than either their office or their wisdom provides—simply because the preacher is just so charming. And that's where the kind of secular version of charisma can be dangerous in a church that believes in charismata.

But if we follow the New Testament idea of charisma, we would think of it as a gift of the Spirit and not something as being inherent in the person.

That's exactly right. That's awfully hard, though, to sort out when you love dear old Dr. So and So or, even worse, when you are dear old Dr. So and So. Right? I mean the toughest thing to say and practice is "Not to me, O Lord, but to you be the glory" when we walk in with our robes and eagerly wait for them to flip the spotlight on us and everybody sit quietly and listen to us. We love that stuff, and we get our ego jollies out of it. How do we qualify that in our own mind and in the minds of our congregation to say

this has to do with gifts and you are just as gifted as I am—just differently. I'm not *the* charismatic person here; I'm part of a charismatic community, and we need to find ways to acknowledge the variety of gifts. It is very hard.

Agreed, so talk about the gifts and professionalism—the professionalization of the ministry. I'm now receiving a salary. I have these people who report to me because I'm the leader, and I have to make decisions about all sorts of administrative things. That because I have a gift, because I have a charisma of proclamation.

Yeah, I know it, and that just raises so many things that have puzzled me all the way through. There's the model of the great big multi-staff church where nobody pretends that the charisma person—the charisma proclamation person—is the charisma management person, but most of us don't have churches like that. In the reality of professional ministry in our time, most of us will be the proclaimer, the primary caregiver, and the primary administrator, and I don't see that changing in the near future.

So what does one do? I think one tries as best as possible to be an integrated human being so that you let your leadership be informed by the things you proclaim, but you don't proclaim a kind of Gnostic gospel unrelated to things like budgets and buildings as if somehow once you put on that pulpit robe you are then divorced from all that stuff. That's equally unreal. And something of the dialogical thing that we keep talking about—how do church leaders bring gifts as theologian and pastor and preacher and be in dialogue, with them, not only with the discipline but also with people in the church who are smart about that kind of stuff. There are too many instances of the minister rushing in as if she were gifted by God with all those gifts without even attending to what other gifts are there in the congregation to which she should be attending. Especially for me it was around business matters. I was a much better pastor when I shut up and paid attention sometimes than when I marched in with the latest Bartlett plan for the budget. The Bartlett plan was in there, and we'd talk about it. But there were people who knew an awful lot more about

some of these things, and faithful people. It's not that I was the Christian person, on the contrary.

The other thing on the professional things is early in my career we had a distinction between vocation and profession; we clergy have a vocation and everybody else has a profession. We had to all rediscover our professionalism the way we're now rediscovering our excellence. And my line it was an attempt to try to get us as much prestige as doctors and lawyers had. This was when doctors and lawyers had more prestige than they do now. So we were jealous. It's fundamentally a vocation; it's not a profession. But there are also things we can learn about professionalism from other professions and not just the helping professions. But how are you involved without being over-involved? How are you a leader without being a dictator? How do you move on when the pastorate is done? How do you know ethically when it's time to let go? A little more professionalism and a little less Jesus on that would be good, because the Spirit always tells them to do just what they want to do anyway, which is stay around and muddle. And if they read a little about what are the professional ethics here, not just what did Paul do, it would help them a great deal. What do I learn from being a responsible professional? There's some good stuff in there.

So what do you think that Protestant church leadership in the U.S. needs the most of right now?

Fuller attention to the biblical resources for our faith; but—and this is going to be very hard for all of us, I think—with a kind of astonishing flexibility. I just have no idea what church is going to look like for Protestants in the next fifteen or twenty years, but I think it won't look like the church of our childhood. The most exciting churches will still preach the Gospel, will still have the sacraments, will still provide pastoral care; but there'll be parts of it that will be hard for us to acknowledge because we won't feel comfortable with it all, and it's always hard for people of my age to say, "Okay, the Spirit's now moving in a new direction." But I think the Spirit is moving in a new

direction, and I don't know what that's going to look like and it doesn't always make me comfortable.