
THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN GOVERNANCE

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Governance is often a dirty word. It is either something explicitly disdained, or it is seen as an unfortunate necessity that anyone in his or her right mind would avoid and evade. All too often, governance becomes equated with bureaucracy. Yet we also know that wise governance is crucial, and that preserving the health of institutions is crucial for our well being as persons and communities.

Hence, this evening I want to reflect on governance as it relates to the preservation of institutions and as an important practice that requires key virtues for its wise exercise. I begin with three vignettes designed to help stir our imaginations about why the practice of Christian governance is so important.

I.

The first vignette is drawn from the interview I had with a search committee from Duke University about becoming Dean of the Divinity School. I knew most of the people on the search committee, and several of them had been my teachers, so I had some sense of what they were going to ask. I thought I was fairly well prepared for the questions that might be asked of me, for example, about what it would mean to be dean of a university-related divinity school formally connected to the United Methodist Church. After all, my father had been a theological administrator and had been one of the deans at Duke Divinity School for a time.

But I was taken aback when about half-way through the conversation one of the faculty members turned to me and said, "Greg, you wrote a book called *Embodying Forgiveness*; how would your work on forgiveness affect the way you would serve as dean?" The question called me up short because it didn't have to do with competence at administering budgets, or relating to the church, or building a faculty, at least

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that I was aware of. It was one of those questions that made me stop, take a deep breath, and think for a moment. The first thought that came to my mind, at least slightly humorously, was to note that I had written a chapter in *Embodying Forgiveness* entitled "Loving Enemies." I thought that might help at least in conducting faculty meetings. After the period of laughter, I began to reflect on the deeper connections.

I related to the committee how my work in *Embodying Forgiveness* - trying to reclaim forgiveness as a craft of practice and a way of life - had a great deal to do with the ways in which institutions needed to be preserved, and dealing with various forms of brokenness and trying to address these issues. Furthermore, I noted that the ways in which I tried to reflect on forgiveness was related also to questions of reconciliation, to healing, and to finding ways to come to terms with the brokenness of the past that would offer new life into the future. The more I started talking myself into a response to the question, the more I was able to see a continuity between the work I had been doing as a scholar and as a teacher, and the work that I thought I might be called to as an administrator and as a dean.

That question has continued to linger with me over the course of time that I have served as dean because I've begun to discover that there is a profoundly theological understanding of what is involved in the practice of governance, and in many ways forgiveness is at the heart of it. I didn't realize quite as poignantly as I might have at the time that my work on forgiveness would also have something to do with what I think a good leader is obliged to do in recognizing failure and being able to ask forgiveness of others. Such practices are difficult because they challenge the myth of the expert that has become enshrined in far too many presumptions in American culture - about clergy as well as about leaders of other organizations and institutions. But that question, "How would your work on forgiveness affect the way you would serve as dean?" challenges the presumption that governance is simply about a set of neutral skills that are somehow separate from the larger theological horizons, convictions, and commitments of our lives.

The second vignette comes from a United Methodist Annual

Conference that I visited several years ago. It was a conference that was bitterly divided by old, familiar arguments between, for example, urban and rural areas, clergy and laity, evangelicals and progressives, rich and poor, black and white, men and women. You could identify the splits in many different ways. These divisions had become so sharp that the conference was having a difficult time focusing on a coherent sense of mission. In light of the tense situation, the presiding bishop decided to do something radical for a United Methodist Annual Conference. Instead of focusing people's time and energy on the business of the conference, he decided to focus almost the entire time around the theme of building common ground through worship, education, and mission. My wife, a United Methodist pastor, and I were invited to come to the conference to lead educational sessions built around Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together*. We were excited to be there because we thought this was somebody else's conference - we could sit back as voyeuristic outsiders enjoying the fact that it wasn't our struggles being engaged.

On the first evening of the conference there was a worship service that was designed to be a context for confessing brokenness. As soon as the service began we discovered that we were not going to be simply voyeurs; everybody was going to be implicated. During the prelude, off on the left side of the altar, a potter was crafting a pot. It was a beautiful pot. As the recipient of a "C" in fourth grade art, I've always admired people who are very gifted artists, so I was transfixed watching this potter craft the pot. As the prelude came to an end, everything went dark. A spotlight shone over in the right corner where a teenager, dressed as a hoodlum, took a brick and threw it through a piece of stained glass that had been erected for the occasion. You heard the shattering of the glass, and then the spotlight turned over to the potter who took the almost finished pot and smashed it back into a lump of clay. Then we began with a litany confessing our brokenness. We were all given a piece of broken glass to carry around with us in a purse, pocketbook, or pants pocket for the next twenty-four hours to reflect on our complicity in the brokenness. The invitation to reflect on our brokenness was comprehensive in our own lives, our families, our friendships, our local churches, our annual

conference, our denomination, the world - so much for being a voyeur.

The sharpest edges of the broken glass had been taken off to keep us out of the hospital, but nonetheless, when I was standing there talking to people, I would put my hands in my pockets and keep feeling this piece of broken glass. Throughout the rest of the service, the potter worked on re-crafting the smashed pot. After an hour and a half service, he was still in the very beginning stages of trying to reshape what was once so near completion.

We gathered again for worship the next night and the service began with another litany confessing our brokenness. Several youth came around with baskets into which everyone put their piece of glass and you could hear the shattering of glass over and over again. After collecting all of the pieces of glass, the students then walked down the center aisle up to the altar area and dropped basket after basket of broken glass into one large washtub. The shattering and re-shattering of glass from the base of the altar sounded through the room. As the last bucket was dropped into the washtub, a black cloth was removed from above the altar revealing a cross made out of broken glass. We were asked then to sing together, "Now Thank We All Our God." The next night was a service of commissioning in mission. James Forbes from Riverside Church came to preach and whenever James Forbes preaches you know there's going to be a sense of the Spirit at work. But particularly in light of the previous two nights, we were prepared to refocus ourselves on a common mission.

The most memorable part of the conference for me was watching the potter on that first night. What struck me was how much easier it was to destroy the pot than it was to re-craft it. That pot was destroyed in a moment, but it was taking hours to begin the slow laborious process of re-shaping, of re-crafting.

A third vignette: When my wife, Susan, and I moved to Baltimore, where I had taken a teaching position, she transferred conferences and was appointed to a two-point charge in the city of Baltimore that the District Superintendent said would be "an opportunity," which is superintendent-speak for a "fixer-upper house." Upon arrival at the church, we started unloading and unpacking boxes and people began

to stop by to tell us about the events that had taken place in the congregation earlier that year. Of course, it was each person's version of the events. Over time, Susan began to put together a few pieces of the puzzle and deduced at least some of the facts about the long-standing bitterness in the congregation that had erupted in February of that year.

The administrative board of the church had splintered into two groups. One of the groups kept meeting in the same room where they had always met, and the other group went down the hall. For forty-five minutes there were two groups simultaneously meeting, both claiming to be the administrative board, discussing the same issue as if the other group didn't exist. When the group that had split off down the hall came back into the main room to announce what they had decided, you can imagine how warmly that was received. They ended up in a shouting match. We don't know who shouted at whom first, or who said what to whom first. We don't even know exactly who threw the first chair; but they ended up literally throwing chairs across the room at each other.

Ironically, at the first meeting of the administrative board after my wife became pastor there, the topic of discussion was why the church wasn't growing. She tried to suggest to them that this wasn't rocket science, that if a congregation is literally throwing chairs at each other it may not be a place that people are going to be drawn to as a sign of the coming kingdom. We spent three years at that congregation and at the end of three years, through Susan's very hard work and patient, careful leadership, we had begun to glimpse the possibility of healing what had happened on that February night. It is a lot easier to smash something into a lump of clay than it is to try to re-craft it.

I've told that story before, and I used to say that the literal throwing of chairs doesn't happen in congregations very often, but that it is an apt metaphor for the problems that emerge in failures of leadership and allowing situations to fester and worsen over time. However, I have had too many people come up after I've told that story to tell me about their own episodes in a local church where they literally had a chair-throwing incident, that I no longer think it is just a metaphor. Rather, I think it aptly addresses the challenge that we face when talking about the leadership of congregations –

what it means to strengthen the church and to be in mission and in service bearing witness to God's in-breaking kingdom. The challenge for us in the practice of governance is how we understand institutions and their fragility, and what is involved in preserving and shepherding them in thoughtful and faithful ways so that we are not always trying to do damage control. Those three vignettes shape what I want to talk about tonight in terms of Christian reflections on the practice of governance.

II.

I turn to some reflections on why institutions matter and how institutions think. Now in some sense I realize I'm preaching to the choir here, yet I think it's important for all of us to reflect on the implicit assumptions that we tend to have across the denominations, and alas, all too often across the Christian church. Somehow we tend to have this mystical and misguided ideal that the Christian church is really not institutional - that it is a non-institutional, charismatic community that sometimes over time, by necessity, has to take on some of those dreaded institutional forms. The ideal is some nostalgic romanticized vision of people just gathering together and loving one another without any of the trappings of institutions. The myth has been particularly pernicious in the 20th century, in the wake of Max Weber and the various forms of sociological analysis that bear a link to him. We have been mired in the unhelpful assumptions about bureaucracy and a kind of anti-institutionalism that surfaced and gained great strength in the 1960s.

But the problem runs much deeper than that, because it goes back to a particular way in which many mistakenly read the New Testament. People imagine Jesus and this rag-tag bunch of disciples getting together in a "60's style commune" to love one another and pretend that there are no burdens, institutions, or struggles to deal with - until the utopia ends with the arrival of the dreaded early Catholicism and all of its institutional trappings. Curiously, the only way in which you can read scripture that way is if you are a Marcionite who has lost sight of the fact that Jesus was a Jew, born in the context of Jewish traditions, and indeed Jewish institutions, and that the people of Israel had already wrestled with a lot of the issues of what it means to live institutionally over time.

We like to recreate this myth that institutions are somehow the necessary, if rather despicable, chaff that we must discard in order to find the pure wheat of the gospel. It's a mistaken conception. It's not faithful to scripture, and it's not faithful to the empirical realities of our life together. We need to reclaim an understanding of what is involved in the sustenance and preservation of institutions that do indeed need criticism from time to time for the ways in which they can become bureaucratic, stifling, and hierarchical. But the romantic notion that we are somehow going to find a purer community apart from the reality of institution is fallacious.

In recent years some of the debates about institutions have emerged around Alasdair MacIntyre's book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology*. More specifically, the debates have focused on his conception of practices and their relation to institutions. MacIntyre develops an account of the vitality of practices not only as what isolated individuals do, but also as something that becomes part of the ongoing work of a community - the practices and the relationships and how those communities are nurtured over time. MacIntyre argues that practices need institutions and institutions can either be contexts that nurture or corrupt those practices. And yet I want to suggest that even though MacIntyre, at his best, criticizes certain strands of 20th century sociological analysis with a deepened understanding of the importance and necessity of institutions, he nonetheless carries a lingering bias that somehow institutions are a necessary by-product accompanying practices that are pure. Since MacIntyre's writing, a number of sociologists, philosophers, political theorists, theologians, and ethicists have begun to work in an even more refined fashion to try to grapple with the ways in which institutions themselves may be contexts that ought to be understood in terms of practices - that they're not simply the places that house practices - but places where practices of Christian governance are integral to a vibrant and faithful way of life.

In 1986 the anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote a book with the very intriguing title, *How Institutions Think*. The title in some ways is better than the analysis, but it's a book well worth reading. She touches on the very notion that institutions think and that institutions carry an identity. In the

chapter, "How Institutions Remember and Forget," an agency is attributed to institutions that suggests they can embody a way of life, that when people become a part of an institution it embeds them in a distinctive way of thinking and living in relation to one another. Her proposals suggest a much richer context for how we might think about our lives and how we might learn to structure our lives: which practices we take as given, which ones we shield from view, where our blindnesses are, and how institutions carry distinctive identities. Douglas's analysis suggests to us that institutions are not simply the necessary by-products or structures to make practices possible, but that institutions themselves create a way of life that both provide opportunities for thinking and constrain thinking. They provide opportunities for practices and also constrain those practices.

Each institution has its own distinctive ethos. By visiting an institution you can begin to get a feel for its character and the kind of contextual influence it exerts on the people that inhabit it. I'm a cradle Methodist. I've been a Methodist for all my life, and I have five generations of Methodist preachers in my family. So when people ask me why I became a Methodist preacher, I say I didn't know I had a choice - it's a family business. I live and breathe and think as a United Methodist. Yet after finishing my Ph.D., I was invited to teach at Loyola College in Baltimore, MD, a Jesuit institution, and I discovered that there was a distinctive ethos to a Jesuit institution that you can feel when you walk on campus. It has its own distinctive way of being. There are code words that say a lot more than just the words themselves. The words "cura personalis" (the care of the person) on a Jesuit campus get chanted sometimes like a mantra. And until you really begin to feel how such things gets embedded not only explicitly but also implicitly in the way of life of an institution, you can't understand what makes it tick.

We talk a lot about diversity within institutions, but we rarely appreciate the diversity of institutions. Diversity of institutions and diversity in how institutions think can offer a richness to us that bureaucracies fail to produce. Denominational bureaucracies, and various other kinds of bureaucracies, even sometimes accrediting bodies, try to compel homogenization. It seems to me that a rich

understanding of institutions and the Christian practice of governance of those institutions does well to preserve a real distinctiveness. I think theological accrediting does a lot better than the accrediting of many other professional institutions precisely because we know about things like the diversity of gifts that Paul writes about, and the diversity of denominational traditions. But unless we begin to think of theological educational institutions in a richer framework than just as the necessary work (e.g., paying the bills, being sure the salaries are covered, and tending to those details nobody likes), unless we begin to think about how institutions think, how they shape an ethos, and how they shape their faculty, staff and students, then a theological school will never really be able to understand the genuine significance of the practice of governance.

I have my own ways in which I have tried to cope with the awkwardness of former faculty colleagues talking about my fall from grace going from teaching into administration. My standard line is that doing administration is penance for the sins of my youth. And on those bad days, after a really horrible faculty meeting, I say I just didn't remember I had done that much as a youth. But those are the kinds of interactions that all too often carry with them a bias against institutions and against administration as being somehow less pure than the real life of the gospel (or of teaching in service to the gospel). A conversation with a woman about her ministry not too long ago was quite revealing. She said that what she really was frustrated by was doing all this administration that kept her from doing the work of ministry. Just think about all the assumptions that are embedded in what counts as ministry and what counts as administration.

Although the title of this lecture is "The Practice of Christian Governance," the title that I perhaps should have given it is "The Right Use of Governance with a View to the Love of God (with apologies to Simone Weil)." Some of you may know the essay by Simone Weil in her book *Waiting for God* entitled "The Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God." It's a beautiful essay in which she really presses questions between prayer and study at a very deep and nurturing level. I use it with first year students in a fall semester class, because I want them to begin their theological

education thinking about the connections between prayer and study. Weil makes the connections in a really challenging way. She wants her readers to think about the gospel, to think about prayer, and to think about God in a non-utilitarian way; not to think about what's in it for me, not to think about the salary that I might be able to make or the ordination that I might be able to have and the power and authority that comes with it. She wants us to think about God for God's own sake. In a theological school that's hard to do, because it is after all our business, our profession.

In her essay, Weil suggests that learning a foreign language is actually essential to learning what it means to pray. What she means is that there are no short cuts to learning the grammar. Whether it's Greek, French, German, Spanish, or English as a second language, you have to go through the hard work of mastering the declensions and the verb tenses. You have to keep working at it. Furthermore, there is nothing like a language class to make it very clear when you've gotten it wrong, and Weil says we need to learn what it means to be ignorant. We can't learn what it means to love God unless we've learned what it means to be ignorant. She says it's actually easier to accept that we are a sinner than that we are ignorant. There are challenging points all through the essay.

Drawing some analogies from Simone Weil's "The Right Use of School Studies" I want to suggest eight different activities that I think are central to the right use of governance, as well as a Christian virtue that is associated with each of them. These reflections in many ways stem from what I have learned over the past several years as I have continued to try to come to terms with the ways in which my work on forgiveness has affected the way in which I serve as a dean.

III.

The first of these activities is to cultivate disinterested governance. What I mean by this, and I'm going to overstate it, is the principle that you ought never place someone in a position of governance who covets the job because in all likelihood that coveting will be for the wrong reasons. People will covet a position for the trappings that it offers, the salary, or power, or recognition, or just for being the next step on the

rung of the ladder of success. I think that in Christian terms what we should be cultivating is a discernment that taps people on the shoulder and calls them into positions of leadership because the gifts are discerned rather than because the power is coveted. Granted, there are all sorts of ways that people can develop false humility and play games with that sort of activity. As Pope John Paul II advances in age, you can see versions of this game among the “papabilia” that are being mentioned as possible successors. It’s well known that if you are seen as wanting the job then you will almost certainly not be elected pope. And so they go through these elaborate means of trying to figure out how to show enough interest and yet how to not say too much. I recently read a story about one person who stepped over the line and is now being widely discredited as a candidate. There are various games that can be played that could suggest a false humility.

The virtue that goes along with the activity of cultivating disinterested governance is humility. That is, recognizing that perhaps you are called to exercise a distinctive form of leadership for a season, but it is not to exercise power tyrannically over people, rather it is to exercise power on behalf of the whole.

A friend of mine was visiting a monastery, and as he was going through the food line for breakfast a particularly crusty monk looked at him and said roughly, “You want eggs, or eggs?!!” My friend said that eggs would be fine. The monk plopped the eggs on his plate and growled, “You want a roll?!!” My friend was a little taken aback by the monk’s manner and he asked his host, “Who is that?” The host replied, “That’s the former abbot.” Upon reflection on the event, my friend thought what a wonderful sign of a well-ordered community where the former abbot finds himself serving eggs in the morning.

You may exercise leadership for a time, but particularly in a stable community you better exercise it carefully because you may return to a role where others are going to be in the position of leadership instead of you. It is one of those realizations that has called me up short on more than one occasion because when I finish being dean I intend to return to the faculty, and then I will be their colleague, and I ought to behave in a way that will make it at least reasonably

possible to do so without too much difficulty. I had a provost once who exercised leadership in such a self-interested way that he made it impossible ever to be seen as a colleague again.

A second activity that I think is extremely important, and one that we have lost sight of in our culture of the expert, is to learn from failure. This is difficult because somehow we think we will be perceived as weak in our governance, in our leadership, if we acknowledge failure. And so there's a temptation to try to cover it over, to gloss it, to turn it into the passive voice. Have you ever noticed in Exodus 32 and 33, the story of the golden calf, that you have the first public relations person for a government leader? When Aaron is confronted by Moses he says, we just put the gold in there and then out came a golden calf. Magical - no one did it, it just happened. The temptation of any leader is to turn the active voice into the passive voice - mistakes were made but nobody made them. And yet, I have discovered that when we can genuinely acknowledge failure, and the vulnerability that goes with that, we then have the capacity to learn from that failure in a way that becomes far more powerful for the wise governance of the institution. It depends, to be sure, on a high level of trust, and yet it's essential to the well-ordered institution.

The virtue that goes along with learning from failure is forgiveness. Forgiveness is something that we as Christians at least claim to have as a central part of our lives. Yet this may be difficult to believe from watching how we relate with – or throw chairs at – one another. I witnessed a bishop of a denomination confess administrative failure in front of the diocese and saw the transforming difference it made. It actually enabled more effective and faithful leadership because he was no longer seen as someone exercising some kind of externalized power over them, but was seen as someone who was part of the body of Christ.

We have to exercise judgment; there is no way we can get around it in our lives. There's no way we can order or govern a community apart from judgment. Yet somehow in that same kind of sentimentalized notion of community, we've taken Matthew 7:1, "Judge not lest you be judged," ripped it out of the context of 7:2-5, and created a community where

we just say, “Don’t worry, be happy. Let’s not evaluate one another. Let’s not grade one another. Let’s not have judgment. Let’s just be happy together.”

Yet the truth of the matter is that we judge all of the time. There is no way we can avoid it. As we walked into this room we started looking around at people and making evaluations and judgments of all sorts. Some of you probably looked at me when I got up here and thought, he’s too young to be a dean. We make judgments all the time. The issue here lies in verses 2-5 of Matthew 7. After “Judge not lest you be judged” comes “for with the judgment you give will be the judgment you receive. You hypocrites! Why do you notice the speck in your brother or sister’s eye and not the log in your own eye?” Faithful Christian understanding of governance will always recognize the log in its own eye. Administratively, morally, theologically, it’s related to that first virtue that I mentioned, humility. Even the most gifted administrators nonetheless see through a glass darkly. Crucial to cultivating a virtue of forgiveness is learning what it means to be forgiven. Only in this way can we understand the richness of what it means to forgive.

The third activity is the wise use of authority and discovering the convergence between being *in* authority and being *an* authority. There is credibility, power, and influence that come from office - from being in authority. One of the hardest things to teach about leadership is a proper understanding of the authority of office. When you become the pastor of a congregation they don’t hear you as Joe or Sarah anymore - you are the pastor. It took me several months to realize that as dean I could no longer just throw out wacky ideas as if I was around the coffee table with several faculty colleagues. Now when I throw out a wacky idea people go away saying, “Well, the dean said...” There is power to the office. It can be abused. It can also be used wisely.

Power used wisely is about the convergence of being *in* authority and being *an* authority, so that it is legitimated, recognized, and sanctioned. The office has the power to put people *in* authority, but sometimes people who are *in* authority are themselves of corrupt character. This calls into question the legitimacy of what they are doing, for even

though they have that power of office, because they are not *an* authority, they are not seen as credible. They are not seen as having the kind of wisdom and gifts necessary for the wise ordering of the institution. Sometimes the gap is found because there are people who are in the “an” authority category who don’t have any official power. For many years that was the role of women in congregations that precluded the capacity of ordination, and yet they would have the wisdom and gifts that were seen as being *an* authority. Is it any wonder that the first moves in women’s ordination came in those traditions like Pentecostalism that tended to have a more fluid movement between office and character?

Perhaps the most powerful example of the convergence between being *in* and *an* authority that I know of in the last twenty-five years is Desmond Tutu in South Africa. He had the virtue of office by being Archbishop of Cape Town, but that office converged with a powerful moral and theological vision that eventually outstripped his office. And so he retains his authority in South Africa and around the world even though he is now retired from his office.

The virtue that is associated with the wise use of authority is fidelity - faithfulness. It is an important virtue, yet somehow we all too frequently have turned faith, even as Paul talks about it in I Corinthians 13, into solely the deposit of convictions rather than being also a commitment to relationships and what is involved and entailed therein. Faithfulness involves our attitudes and habits as well as our convictions.

The fourth activity is nurturing continuity with tradition. One of the great temptations of leaders is to become disciples of Melchizedek. In the book of Hebrews, Melchizedek, the high priest, is described by the writer to the Hebrews as being without father, without mother, without genealogy. This is a temptation that pastors have - a temptation anybody has - in becoming a leader of an institution, to assume you come in with a blank slate, to start with your own vision, to neglect the past. Now to be sure, all of us have days when we wish we could be Melchizedek, because the past can burden and haunt as well as give life. In nurturing continuity with tradition, tradition must be thought of in the sense that you find from Jaroslav Pelikan in his book *The Vindication of Tradition*.

Pelikan makes an important distinction. He says, "Tradition is the living faith of the dead. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." There is always a danger in governing in a traditionalist way. The importance of the continuity of tradition is to recognize that the particular shape and the way that each institution thinks and lives is shaped by generations who have gone before. This happens sometimes in explicit ways, sometimes in implicit ways, sometimes in life-giving ways, and sometimes in really corrupt and distorted ideological ways. Churches, seminaries, and universities like to tell the story of their past in very romanticized ways. But to nurture continuity with tradition is to recognize that who we are now is shaped for both good and ill by where we have been. I think one of the most important ways in which we can exercise leadership is to read histories. I like to read local church histories - they are fascinating.

There's a church in Illinois where Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr's father pastored for many years. A woman who was quite devoted to Pastor Niebuhr wrote all about his exploits in the church and what he had done in the community and all the ways in which he had ministered to people. Then at the very end there was one last sentence, "Pastor Niebuhr and his wife had two sons and so far as we can tell they both went into the ministry." Two of the great giants of 20th century theology and church life get hardly a footnote in a local church's history, because what was really significant is what had happened there. To nurture continuity does not mean we are replicating the past, but it is about remembering it.

The virtue that is associated with nurturing that continuity is remembrance, which is very different from either amnesia or nostalgia. Remembrance involves a truthful accounting of the past in both praise and penitence. It overcomes amnesia by genuinely remembering what happened, and it overcomes nostalgia by remembering truthfully. Forgiveness is crucial to our ability to remember the past without being haunted by it.

A fifth and closely related activity is developing creativity in moving into the future. New days provide new tasks. Faithful leadership is always about nurturing change and thinking creatively in appreciation for where we have been. We can't just replicate the past and stay where we are; we've

got to move into the future in faithful ways. It's about creativity. Theologically, it's about trusting that the Holy Spirit is at work in the world. One of the great biblical texts demonstrating the sinful side of this is the story in Numbers 13 and 14 where twelve spies are sent out to look at the Promised Land. They come back with a majority and a minority report. The majority of ten says, "We can't go forward. It's a land flowing with milk and honey, but there are giants up ahead. There are too many obstacles, we can't go forward." Only two of the twelve spies say, "We have to go forward. God is calling us there and if God is calling us to a land flowing with milk and honey, we can trust God for the future." Well, the crowd sides with the ten and say, "Let's go back to Egypt." Now remember what Egypt was - slavery, oppression, and suffering - but it was familiar. It was a desire to become a traditionalist and a refusal to think about the future.

My father used to say every local church he'd ever known had a back to Egypt committee in it. Even more, every person I've ever known, myself included, has a back to Egypt part of our soul. The right use of governance is about looking creatively toward the future and trusting that the God we worship is the God not only of yesterday, but also of tomorrow.

The virtue that is associated with moving creatively toward the future is hope. Hope is very different from optimism. Optimism is having confidence because of who we are - we are getting better and better each and every day - and that can all too easily degenerate into cynicism. Winston Churchill said, "If a person is not an optimist at age sixteen he doesn't have a heart. If he's not a cynic by the age of forty, he doesn't have a head." Optimism and cynicism go together as two sides of a coin, but I am suggesting that remembrance and hope also go together. Hope is a confidence not because of who we are, but because of who God is, and that is at the heart of it.

The sixth activity is what I call taking the long view. I think this is particularly important in the context of governance around the theme of silence and speech, but also in terms of action. How often we are tempted to lash back, to just say what is going to make us feel good, even though it

may compromise the institution over the long term. We often act for the short term, failing to recognize how much easier it is to smash the pot into a lump of clay than it is to re-craft it. Taking the long view is recognizing that good things get nurtured over time and that sometimes only the seed of an idea is going to be planted by you while the nurturing and reaping will be done by your successors.

Furthermore, I think there is something integral to the wise use of governance about a redemptive silence as well as a redemptive speech, about not acting too hastily and waiting until it seems good to the Spirit and to us (Acts 15). Notice there is no “me” in that description. It’s not about my ego, but what is good for the whole. Taking the long view is about waiting until it seems right. It doesn’t mean waiting forever. It doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t sometimes take decisive action and let the chips fall where they may. But it needs to be done recognizing the costs that are incurred and what is involved in the long view. The virtue associated with taking the long view is patience. It’s not passivity, but patience, an active and crucial virtue that Simone Weil has much to teach us about. Weil points to the quality of waiting, of attending, as an activity crucial to life with God. We need to cultivate the virtue of patience as an active commitment to the long view rather than the quick fix.

The seventh activity I take from the writings of Simone Weil and Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet. Seamus Heaney calls it redress. Simone Weil writes about it in the context both of redress and of a kind of tilting. I don’t really know how to describe the activity except as tilting. Seamus Heaney describes it as the idea of counter weighting, of balancing out forces of redress, tilting the scales of reality towards some transcendent equilibrium. I describe it as tilting, of trying to avoid there being a sense of any permanent losers. In any institution, in any gathered community over time, different interest groups and divisions are going to develop. Hopefully they become cross-cutting rather than entrenched, but part of the wise use of leadership is using tilting to keep a sense of balance. This does not mean become lukewarm like the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3 to whom the Lord says, “I spew you out of my mouth, because you are neither hot nor cold.” It’s not that sense of moderation that has nothing to

offer, but perhaps what the London Economist magazine calls the “extreme center,” or “dynamic center,” that tilts like a ship back and forth to try to maintain its balance over time.

Peter Hebblethwaite’s book on Pope Paul VI is an extraordinary testimony to his leadership and why he was eventually selected as pope. During the Second Vatican Council he worked extraordinarily hard behind the scenes while various decisions were being made to try to minimize the sense in which anybody felt like a loser. Too often we look in the short term, try to get a majority vote, and even if it’s eight to seven, we claim a victory without any recognition of how the other seven may be permanently identified as the losers. And the seeds of bitterness begin to grow. It is that sense of tilting, of seeing what is necessary to keep a sense of balance over the long term that holds people together. And the virtue that goes along with this is discernment.

The eighth and final activity is what I call prophetic leadership and power. I use this phrase in two senses. There’s the most obvious sense that we could think of that any wise governance of an institution calls for the importance of prophetic critique against the injustices, the loveless indifference, the bureaucratic structures that sap the energy out of the system and call for the kind of confident leadership that says, “This ought not to be so.” And yet prophetic leadership is not only about cursing, but also about blessing.

I learned about this lesson from one of my colleagues who preached a sermon on Balaam’s donkey. This is not a text that is often preached in churches. It’s not in any of the lectionaries so far as I can tell. And yet, it’s an important story for us because it turns out that Balaam can only exercise prophecy when he discovers that he’s no smarter than a donkey, or put in the vernacular, no smarter than an ass. But you notice the prophecy that God then puts into his mouth, “How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your encampments, O Israel.” It’s easier to be a prophet who just baldly speaks the truth. I have faculty who enjoy that role – treasure it – would like to be quoted in newspapers for it, and I get to generate my fair share of correspondence explaining it to the people who are outraged, sometime in ways I agree with, sometimes in ways I shudder from. The wise use of governance calls both for times of prophetic critique and prophetic blessing.

Can we exercise leadership and power in ways that generate and reflect authentic affection for the people we serve? I think this is one of the real struggles that happens in the transition from seminary into the first five years of ordained ministry. You come out on fire and then you realize that you can't change everything in the first six months of your ministry. And you begin to wonder why God sent you to these folks with very ordinary struggles, fears, and sometimes much worse than that, divisions. And you have to learn to bless as often as you curse. And here, the virtue is the greatest of all virtues, from I Corinthians 13 - the one that abides, namely love.

I have suggested eight activities and eight virtues that are involved in the right use of governance. In conclusion, I want to suggest briefly four corollary commitments that are crucial to wise governance – and remind us that we are called to conform all of our governance to God.

The first commitment is spending enough time with the people involved with the institution to cultivate collegiality and meaningful disagreements. Wise governance is not only about talking to those people you agree with, or just looking over your shoulder at the people you have to keep at bay, but cultivating meaningful disagreements. MacIntyre's account of tradition suggests that it is born out of the continuing arguments over time among people. And I think these sustained arguments are essential for us. One of the most disturbing signs of poor governance, particularly in seminaries, but also all too often in churches, is when people gather together more often when a vote is at stake than for sustained conversation and argument. We all know that the day of the vote is the last time when you really want to start a conversation about an issue, because as soon as people know a vote is on the line, positions tend to rigidify. And then once people vote one way or the other, they spend the rest of their time defending why they voted that way. There need to be occasions for sustaining conversation and disagreement when a vote is not at stake.

The second commitment is prayer. It is, after all, at the heart of Simone Weil's essay "On the Right Use of School Studies." It is about having an openness and a receptivity where we recognize the need to be re-centered in God. It is

about engaging in prayer where we are silent and listen, not simply where we offer up our agenda, but where we find renewal over time. The right use of governance requires what Timothy calls praying without ceasing.

The third commitment is to reevaluate our priorities in relation to checkbooks and calendars. The heart of our priorities and convictions are found in what we do with our checkbooks and our calendars. And I'll tell you the honest to goodness truth; I don't really want to show people either of them. But even worse, in the context of governance, I'd much rather show you my checkbook than my calendar. We are far less intentional than we ought to be about either of them. We allow other things to shape them rather than for us to be intentional about how we ought to shape the use of our checkbook and the use of our calendar.

The fourth commitment is observing the Sabbath. The tendency for people in governance and in positions of leadership is to let the reservoir of our souls run dry – to get depleted to the point where there is no more water there and no rain on the horizon. For most people in leadership it's not a question of whether you go to the meeting, but which of the two or three competing meetings you are going to get to. And it's easy to get caught up in what is euphemistically called 24/7. Particularly in the United States, but in most of the industrialized world, we have many people who are over-worked, creating a permanent underclass of under-worked people. As my wife reminds me with far too much regularity – the injunction to observe the Sabbath is a commandment, not a suggestion, and is one of the definitive ten!

Desmond Tutu, even during the greatest of the struggles against apartheid and some of the most intense difficulties, never failed to take his monthly retreat. My colleague and good friend, Peter Storey, who was President of the South African Council of Churches when Tutu was Executive Secretary, said he used to get irritated that Tutu would leave when the media was hounding and decisions had to be made. And yet, he found consistently that Tutu would return with greater steel in his spine, with greater center in God, and a deeper sense of purpose. He came back renewed - essential to what is involved in wise governance.

Conforming our governance to God involves

abandoning at least two temptations: namely, the temptation of Aaron in Exodus 32 and 33 who wanted to indulge the people's fantasies and give them what they wanted rather than what they needed, as well as the temptation of Jonah who gets God right and resents it. Notice in the fourth chapter of Jonah how he beautifully describes God, "I knew you were a God slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, ready to relent from punishing."

It doesn't do any good, however, if we train our people in the deepest and wisest, most truthful understanding of God, and disconnect it from what that means for how we order our lives together. It doesn't do any good to indulge the fantasies. It doesn't do any good to teach the truth unless teaching and living the truth come together. You may say he talked an awfully long time to come back around to something so simple. But I want to suggest that the heart of what I've been trying to reflect on are some words from I Peter 5:1-4 on the significance of governance, "Now as an elder myself, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed. I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it, not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those who are in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears you will win the crown of glory that never fades away."

There is, I believe, a distinctively Christian perspective on the right practice of governance that we are all called to cultivate so that perhaps we can do a better job of sustaining and preserving those institutions which God has given us. And in a time of fragmentation, and in a culture tempted to despair, we need to be a hopeful people who believe – and practice – the wise Christian governance of institutions.