

## DWELLING IN THE DIVINE LIFE: THE TRANSFORMATIONAL DIMENSION OF LEADERSHIP AND PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

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The mark of effectiveness, it is said, is to know what to do and to be able to do it well. Church leaders are expected to exercise decisive - even commanding - authority in ecclesial institutions, and they are trained to do just that: to obtain a certain level of mastery so that they are capable of leading others in the Christian faith and life. Of course, effectiveness in ministry is a good thing. Yet, if leaders are supposed to develop ever greater ego competence and control in order to be effective, how does *metanoia* or radical change fit into the success-driven view of leadership? How does that comport with surrendering oneself to the transforming leadership of the Holy Spirit?

If you look in just about any dictionary, the definition of leadership will invariably emphasize the ability to manage, direct, regulate, control, and supervise.<sup>1</sup> It used to be

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<sup>1</sup> Definitions of power vary widely in sociological and organizational literature, e.g.: "the possibility of imposing one's will upon the behavior of others," Max Weber, *Max Weber on law in economy and society*, ed. Max Rheinstein, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959); "the ability to influence the actions of others, individuals or groups," R. Krausz, "Power and leadership in organizations," *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 16, 1986: 69; "a potential for changing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of others," Rudolph F. Verderber and Kathleen S. Verderber, *Inter-act: using interpersonal communication skills* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1992, 280). A classic analysis of power that has sustained its influence in the discussion over fifty years is the collection of essays in *Studies in Social Power*, especially the essays, "Bases of Social Power" and "A Field-Theoretical Conception of Social Power", ed. Dorwin Cartwright, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959).

That power is an intrinsic feature of leadership is accepted here without question, as is the association of power with ego agency. That leaders act to change or influence persons, whether directly or indirectly, for the sake of a larger purpose is intrinsic to leadership. The question I raise concerns the wisdom of training ecclesial leaders such that leadership is primarily if not exclusively portrayed in terms of ego-driven power, the agency of the "I" to act upon or with others.

Of course, the thesis that the competency and control of ego agency is secondary to a more fundamental dimension of knowing, the convictional, brings with it a danger of misconstrual. Some will fear that I am advocating a form of leadership-lite that undercuts the necessity of competency and effective

commonsense that leaders exercised power *over* others in these ways. Recently however, emphasis has shifted to a leader's emotional IQ or relational skills necessary to 'cast a vision', 'get the right people on the bus', or create a "learning organization". Whether leaders should exercise power *over* or *with* others is an interesting question, but it is not one that I deal with here.<sup>2</sup> Rather, I assume that leaders should exercise their agency in many different ways depending upon the circumstances.

The question I would like to pursue is whether the exercise of power is most definitive of Christian leadership. Especially if we think of power as the ability to get things done or as the ability to get others to do what they otherwise would not ordinarily do, we are thinking about power as ego agency: something that "I" (or "we") do, agency that "I-we" exert.<sup>3</sup> But, if we think of leadership as primarily the exercise of ego agency over and with others, we stand a great chance of missing one of the most fundamental dynamics inherent to human growth and development: transformation.

We are concerned here to explore the relation of transformation and Christian leadership. And as we come to greater clarity about the central role of transformation to Christian leadership, we will question the overriding - if not in many cases exclusive - emphasis in theological training of leaders upon gaining command and control, upon power over or with others, in short, upon the mastery of the ego as definitive of effective and successful leadership. We will wonder aloud whether the theological methods taught in seminaries and promoted by academics and denominational officials are sufficiently spiritually oriented and thus

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action. Others may take the thesis as a justification for do-little, know-little leadership in which ignorance and sloth are excused. Nothing could be further from my intentions. Indeed, as the essay continues, it is demonstrated that transformation is in many respects dependent upon the passion and competence with which the ego strives to resolve problematic situations. The overall point here is that a dualistic, either/or way of thinking about the relation of the ego to transformation and convictional insight is inherently flawed and will inevitably result in misunderstanding. Rather, the relation is better conceived as an asymmetrical both/and very much like the paradigmatic hypostatic union of divine and human in Jesus Christ.

<sup>2</sup> For an easily accessible differentiation of power over from power with, see Martha Ellen Stortz, *Pastor Power* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> The term 'ego' is used in a neutral, not pejorative, sense as an essential faculty in human psychology.

theologically adequate. Do they help leaders practice theology and ministry theologically? To paraphrase theologian David Kelsey, are the practices of leadership helping us to understand God and everything in relation to God more truly?<sup>4</sup>

When we speak of training leaders for the church, we are speaking of theological education, whether that takes place in seminaries or in other venues. One of the most important developments in theological education over the past decades has been the emergence of an expansive understanding of practical theology, which reflects a broad consensus among theological educators that theology is inherently practical. That is, theology is a practice of the Church rooted in particular contexts and influenced by interests and perspectives. In addition to all that theology can be, it always refers, however indirectly, to the general human situation as well as to the unique personhood of individuals. Thus, we have the linkages between leadership, practical theology as an overall method for leadership, and the human factor in the unique personhood of actual leaders. The supposition of this essay is that not only is practical theology key to the exercise of leadership, but the personhood of leaders is key to a theological exercise of practical theology. By attending to actual persons who lead, we will discover a hidden dimension within practical theological method that is essential to making leadership Christian. To ground the topic concretely, we will follow the story of a pastor, Harold Backus, and his congregation as their ministry together was severely tested and graciously transformed.

## **PERSONALIZING PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AND ECCLESIAL LEADERSHIP**

Beloved by congregants and respected among peers, Harold Backus was in many ways an exemplar of competence, effectiveness, and compassion in rural pastoral

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<sup>4</sup> David H. Kelsey, "What's Theological About This Theological School?" Yale Divinity School Opening Convocation Address, September 3, 1996. See also his book, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About A Theological School*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

ministry.<sup>5</sup> Harold was appointed to serve Auburn United Methodist Church, a fairly large and vibrant congregation at the center of a rural county in Nebraska. Auburn UMC was a stable congregation in the midst of decreasing population and eroding economic vitality. Harold believed that it was their obligation and mission to help declining congregations in southeastern Nebraska, and he had a plan for a cooperative ministry in the region.

His intense passion and hope for success was motivated in part by the probability that he would retire from this congregation. But, he was also determined that this endeavor would not repeat a troubling pattern that had followed his ministry at two former pastoral appointments. In both of these, attendance rose and ministries blossomed. However, when Harold was appointed elsewhere and had to leave, neither congregation sustained their spiritual growth but rather regressed quite rapidly to their former patterns of dysfunction and decline.

The day Harold told me about these disappointments in his ministry, his sadness and remorse were palpable. Determined that his present congregation would not backslide as the others did, he was committing himself to Doctor of Ministry study in order to find the best model of cooperative ministry to implement in his context. When we parted that day, neither of us knew what suffering lay ahead for Harold and the remarkable transformation he and his congregation would experience.

As I reflect upon the students I have taught, Harold Backus epitomizes the kind of student that makes teaching theology exciting and rewarding. With a wealth of experience to draw upon and the eagerness and ability to learn practically and conceptually, Harold was and continues to be a pastoral practical theologian. I call Harold a practical theologian because his pastoral role and his formal theological study show the significance of practical theological method to not only his pastoral role but also, and more importantly, to him personally, to his spiritual formation and vocational calling as an ecclesial leader. His explicit use of a hermeneutical

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<sup>5</sup> In reporting Harold's changes and insights, I am in the fortunate position of having not only our conversations but also his final thesis as the basis for the facts of the case and for my observations. I appreciate Harold's permission to use his story and for his corrective comments on the final draft.

framework of practical theology helped to prepare him for a transformation in his worldview and self-understanding that, in turn, reverberated throughout his pastoral practices. His story exemplifies both the usefulness of a hermeneutically-oriented practical theology as well as its limitations, and thus the need for a more comprehensive understanding of practical theological method that will be of greatest usefulness to the church and its leadership.

It would not only be fair but accurate to characterize Harold's approach to ministerial action and theological study within the framework of Don Browning's *Fundamental Practical Theology*. The specific proposal by Don Browning is in many respects consonant with other current approaches.<sup>6</sup> The emerging consensus among scholars in practical theology is that theology as a whole is fundamentally practical and that the disciplines of history, dogmatics/systematics, and biblical study are submovements that contribute to and ground the practicing of theology in both the Christian tradition and in the world. Although the insight into the practical nature of theology is not new, it has challenged the reigning compartmentalization of theological disciplines and has stirred up quite a debate among theological educators, many of whom take exception to what may be perceived as self-aggrandizement by practical theologians.

My sense of the current scholarship is that practical theology is in danger of morphing from a clerical paradigm into an 'academic' paradigm, resulting in a shift in focus from persons and practices of ordained ministry, however limited, to the rather impersonal components, rationale, and technique of method. While Browning, like much of the academic, scholarly literature on practical theological *method*, pays a great deal of attention to subjectivity in abstraction, he

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<sup>6</sup> Browning is quite indebted to David Tracy, especially *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, (New York: Crossroad, 1989). Other hermeneutically-oriented practical theologies include the following: Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains: Manual for Practical Theology*, Tr. Reinder Bruinsma, (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999); Johannes A. Van Der Ven, *Ecclesiology in Context* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996); Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980). Many other scholars, in addition to those named elsewhere in this essay, have influenced the debate through seminal essays including Richard R. Osmer, Mary Elizabeth Moore, and Marcel Viau, to name but a few.

largely ignores the personhood of the practical theologian. The concrete identity, role, and contextuality of the person who leads as a disciple of Christ, such as Harold Backus, has receded into the background as many scholars shift their focus to the rather abstract subject of the nature and method of practical theology. With the notable exception of James Fowler's faith development approach<sup>7</sup> and James Loder's Neo-Chalcedonian approach<sup>8</sup>, most of the scholarly attention focuses on the 'what,' 'how,' and 'why' of practical theological method and leaves out the concrete 'who' that practices theology. A restoration of concrete personhood - and the interplay between discipleship and leadership - to the discourse on practical theology has the potential to add a significant dimension to its method that will actually deepen its *practical* and *theological* qualities.

Interestingly enough in the mid-1960's, the curriculum of Saint Paul School of Theology was structured according to an insight similar to Browning's: that theology is fundamentally practical and theological study should thoroughly integrate theory and practice into critically reflective praxis. Given that Harold took his MDiv from Saint Paul, he was steeped in an educational process that critically correlated the traditions and practices of the church with the more broadly conceived notion of "human experience."<sup>9</sup> For this reason, examining Harold's journey as a practical theologian may yield important insights into the significance of theological method to leadership and of leadership to theological method.

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<sup>7</sup> Fowler's faith development theory is set forth in *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 1995). Fowler was involved in the renaissance of practical theology in the 1980s; his analysis of the landscape is "Practical Theology and Theological Education: Some Models and Questions," *Theology Today* 42:1, April 1985: 43-58. In subsequent work to correlate faith development theory with Christian education and formation of disciples, even though practical theology has been primarily characterized in terms of hermeneutics, Fowler has consistently been attentive to the psychological structures of knowing, see especially "The Emerging New Shape of Practical Theology," in *Practical Theology - International Perspectives*, F. Schweitzer and J.A. van der Ven, eds., (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> In addition to Loder's major works, see "The Place of Science in Practical Theology: The Human Factor," *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 4, 2000: 22-41.

<sup>9</sup> These categories are intentionally characterized in terms of Browning's practical theological correlation, *Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 45.

## THE ACCIDENT AND CRISIS

After only four months in appointment to Auburn UMC, all hell broke loose. One glorious October day, as Harold was pushing his grandson in a swing, he lost his balance. As he fell, the swing hit him right above his eyebrow. Searing pain and flowing blood ended the day at the park. But it wasn't until a week later that problems developed with Harold's sight, problems that threatened the eye itself and his sight in general. During the next two months, enduring a series of risky surgeries, Harold was confined to his darkened bedroom, restricted from even the slightest movement, and left alone to endure his pain and brood on his misfortune.<sup>10</sup>

Fortunately for the congregation, there were members who stepped up to the plate and took over pastoral responsibilities such as preaching and pastoral visitation. When I interviewed some of the leaders in the congregation, they reported that the most surprising development during the period of Harold's medical emergency was that the congregation not only survived but thrived. Relationships among the members grew more positive as conflict and complaints among the members disappeared. Attendance and financial giving remained stable during Harold's absence, and Thanksgiving and Christmas preparations proceeded undeterred. To the congregation their ability to carry on was a source of pride. However, to Harold the news of the congregation's health began to corrode his self-esteem and sense of vocational calling. Like a hamster on a treadmill, his mind kept churning over the 'failures' of his pastoral leadership at his former congregations and his apparent irrelevance at Auburn. He questioned his calling to ministry, questioned his abilities, questioned his faith. Although everywhere else it was the Advent season of light and expectation, the darkness in Harold's room reflected the dark night of his soul.

As Christmas Day approached, Harold's condition improved, and plans were made for him to emerge from his solitary confinement to join the congregation for the first time

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<sup>10</sup> This case has been used in another essay in transformational dynamics, "Leadership and Serendipitous Discipleship: A Case Study of Congregational Transformation," in *Redemptive Transformation in Practical Theology: Essays in Honor of James E. Loder, Jr.*, Dana R. Wright and John D. Kuentzel, eds., (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishers Company, 2004).

in the Christmas Eve service. Preparing for his arrival, curtains had to be drawn and lights extinguished. As Harold was led by his wife slowly and carefully into the building, anxiety in both Harold and the congregation was high. Harold feared that the congregation would not want an invalid as a pastor, and the congregation feared that Harold would want to leave. As he entered the sanctuary, every eye followed his belabored movements. A few candles were lit, and the service commenced with its familiar cadence and rituals. At the close of the service, much to Harold's glad surprise, the congregation enveloped him with a warm embrace of welcome and rejoicing. One can imagine that to the members, Harold seemed as frail, vulnerable, and helpless as the Christ child, whereas for Harold, each face radiated Christ incarnate. That moment of radical hospitality signaled a turning point for both Harold and the congregation. Though subtle and unrecognized at the time, the chaos of the crisis was set within a new and powerful framework of gracious collaboration. Their ministry together was gradually reordered over the following months and years, reorienting and reconstituting Harold's sense of self, his leadership, and Auburn's common life.

As winter repented and converted to spring, Harold experienced a gradual *metanoia*. Whereas up to this point he was used to directing congregational activities, his convalescence forced him to practice leadership very differently. The constraints upon his body seemed ironically to liberate his mind and worldview. Indeed, the truth of his limits set him free to reconceive the church and his leadership in radically new ways. He began to notice that in the bustling, even chaotic, disequilibrium of congregational life, patterns of ecclesial life were emerging with integrity and coherence. He began to recognize and appreciate the depth of the church members' determination, insight, and faithfulness. He acceded to the uncertainty of not-knowing, and he started prioritizing relationships over tasks. He listened more and did less; he began to depend upon and trust the membership. He reported to me that his pastoral style shifted from being a rescuer, protector, and director, to living intentionally as a "discernmentarian," a rather awkward term coined by Olsen



and Morris for one who leads faith communities to hear, accept, and then obey God's voice.<sup>11</sup>

What happened to Harold's DMin project of implementing a cooperative ministry? Well, it died its own death during Harold's convalescence. Later, it was resurrected; it was raised from its tomb a new creation and given a new name. Instead of calling it "cooperative ministry," which is identified in United Methodist polity with the top-down structure of denominational hierarchy, Harold has renamed it *collaborative* ministry. By this, Harold was responding to a remarkable transformation in his mind, life, and ministry, and in his relations with his congregants, pastoral colleagues, and other congregations.

During the years of study following his injury and recovery, he sought to understand and work out the illumination he had experienced (i.e., *fides quaerens intellectum*). Rather than imposing a rigid hierarchical structure of cooperation from the outside and trying to gain 'buy-in' by constituents, he reconceived the DMin project (and the church's life comprehensively) as an explicitly incarnational and communal endeavor. That is to say, he now begins with the assumption that the Spirit of Christ is *already* everywhere at work and manifesting itself (incarnation) as the reconciliation of the world in Christ (communion). This vision of God and of our life in God given to him in that Christmas Eve service led to a sense of conviction to which he tried to be faithful. He strove both to surrender to that central insight and to work it out conceptually and practically. Greater clarity of the vision led him to establish relationships with his colleagues in ministry, cultivate a space among them in which the Spirit can speak forthrightly, and trust that they will best be able to hear the Spirit as they communally share their lives and hold one another up in the Spirit. This is indeed what he has done among an emerging cadre of United Methodist pastors in southeast Nebraska. Among that group has taken shape a unique collaborative ministry to which I can attest, as I have had the privilege of looking over his shoulder as he has made his way successfully through the DMin project and the degree.

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<sup>11</sup> The notion of discernmentarian is developed by Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1997).

The following themes name some of the dimensions of his life and thinking in which Harold experienced transformation:

- theological: from a subtle deism to robust panentheism that conceives of God as already present and working among the people.
- anthropological: from semi-Pelagian works-righteousness to *imago Dei*.
- ecclesiological: from church as society-of-volunteers to church as persons-in-communion.
- leadership style: from directive to discerning, evocative, and supportive as the Spirit of Christ is manifest in and among congregants.
- organizational: from a clerical paradigm of management to a rotating and flexible hierarchy in which congregational members rise to leadership depending upon the situation.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, we are not really concerned here with Harold's project, *per se*. Rather, I want us to look carefully and critically at the practical theological method at work in the shift in Harold himself. When Harold first entered the DMin program, he was engaged in a practical theological method similar to Browning's critical hermeneutics. He studied his context in light of the Christian Story in both scripture and tradition. He attended to the needs and interests of people as well as to the vision and mission of the church in southeastern Nebraska. He searched for models of ministry to inform and guide his project. Situation and theory were critically correlated through action and reflection for the sake of reconstructing future praxis. So far, so good. But the story does not end there but proceeds into a dynamic state of personal and organizational transformation. And it is in fact the transformative part of the story that the existing framework of critical hermeneutics overlooks.

In the transformations of Harold's understanding of himself and of the life of the church, there is something more at work than a change in critical interpretation; namely, the subjective framework of interpretation itself was transformed.

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<sup>12</sup> Extracted from Backus' D.Min thesis, "Making Connections for Collaborative Ministry," Saint Paul School of Theology, 2005.

Harold was converted to another gestalt/worldview that re-established his understanding of himself, the church, and his leadership upon new ground. Let us be clear: it is not the content of the transformation that is of particular interest here. Although we may applaud Harold for moving from a top-down managerial style to a more evocative and collaborative leadership, we should not let that move distract us from the transformational dynamic itself. It is the transformation itself, the reframing of his life and worldview, that will help us discern an epistemological level more fundamental than ego-driven cognition. It is the transformation that re-structured fundamental axioms of his self-understanding and ministerial leadership. *Harold's transformation transformed the hermeneutical method by which he approached his project.*

This case suggests that there is an epistemological level hidden underneath or within, as it were, the ego-driven cognition operative in hermeneutics, a hidden order within the interpretative process that establishes its structure and framework. Thus, transformation is an epistemological dynamic more fundamental than hermeneutics yet inherently connected to it. Redemptive transformation works at the convictional level of our knowing and doing, and for this reason it is important to acknowledge it so that we can live into it more fully.

Why? What is at stake in an awareness of and acceptance of the transformative processes within our knowing and leadership? Let us take Harold's situation for example. Days and weeks after the Christmas Eve service, he could have interpreted the experience sentimentally or aesthetically rather than as a vision that convicted him to see reality differently. Harold could have easily slid back into his old habits of leadership and tried to direct and influence the congregation from his bedroom. So very often, this is our *modus operandi*. We stop to smell a rose and appreciate its beauty but do not perceive the cosmic Christ within it, and we miss the vision of a deeper reality all around us. In essence, to acknowledge the underlying process by which we encounter the divine Logos and are transformed by it is the first step to being more aware of it and living more fully into it. If leaders are to be theologically oriented and spiritually attuned, they will be increasingly more open to their own transformation.

We will call this type of transformative knowing, *convictional*. The process by which changes in convictional knowing occurs will be called both *redemptive transformation* and *conversion*. We will clarify these concepts a bit further.

## CONVICTIONAL KNOWING

W. J. McClendon and James Smith, in their book *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, define conviction as “a persistent belief such that if X [a person or group] has a conviction, it will not easily be relinquished and it cannot be relinquished without making X a significantly different person [or group] than before.”<sup>13</sup> Convictions are rather deep-seated and significant beliefs by which we understand and orient ourselves to reality, whether theistically conceived or not. A significant convictional change has the feel of a conversion, a reorientation to a new ground in existence, and it will inevitably play out in what we think and do. Just as a tent is held upright, taut, and stable upon the ground by tent-pegs driven deep into the ground, our convictions drive us deeply into and hold us relatively stable upon the ground of reality. If one or more of the tent pegs is pulled up, our ‘tent’ becomes less stable and may even collapse. But if the pegs are pulled taut, repositioned, and driven deeper into the ground, the tent becomes more stable and its functioning as a tent is enhanced. Just so, when our basic convictions are uprooted, the whole of our being is shaken. But if new convictions emerge to drive us more deeply into the reality of existence, we experience greater stability and are able to function at a higher level of competence.

Convictions are generated through our interaction with the world, and for this reason they have, at least to some extent, a relation to objective realities. Nevertheless, convictions are not objective; they are inherently subjective and therefore limited and ambivalent, being only partially true at best. Each of us thinks and acts on the basis of these partial and intrinsically limited truths that we hold, many of which are perhaps more error than truth. But for us these

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<sup>13</sup> James Wm. McClendon, Jr. and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994), 5. Also, convictions are a species of belief; they are fundamental beliefs: “Convictions are the beliefs that make people what they are” (7).

convictions-flawed and incomplete as they are-function as truths through which we experience and understand the reality that we contact. Most of the time, our basic beliefs operate at the tacit level of awareness.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, we are only vaguely aware of them, if at all. Operating unseen and unrecognized, they wield enormous power to shape and color our experience, thought, and action. To the extent that we remain unaware of our convictions, to that extent we are in effect enslaved to them. But under certain circumstances, e.g., when convictions are challenged through crisis or questioned through reflection, they rise to the explicit level of awareness. We can focus on them and hold them at some distance, as it were, from us. For example, we do not know why Harold believed that leaders should relate to followers as managers, but his leadership was in large part determined by it. His leadership praxis changed only when his convictional framework of assumptions and beliefs about himself, his vocation, and the church changed drastically. Fortunately for us, Harold's story demonstrates that even as our convictions are deeply held and vigorously defended against all sorts of threats, they can be transformed by powerful insights.

To help us clarify the pattern of transformation by which a set of convictions are reconstituted, we will turn to James E. Loder, whose penetrating acumen illumined the centrality of transformational dynamics in practical theology as well as the generic pattern of transformation operating in all kinds of conversions. With a career of scholarship and teaching spanning more than 40 years at Princeton Seminary, Loder explored the social and natural sciences for patterns of creativity and transformation. Before we think about transformation theologically and spiritually, however, we need to think about transformation in a generic sense. Transformation names a process by which all kinds of living things self-organize through the emergence of hidden orders that rise and replace the current structure. From the evolutionary emergence of life from inanimate matter over billions of years to the orthogenetic movement of human beings through stages of psychological as well as cultural development, there is an underlying pattern to the "change in

<sup>14</sup> Cf., Michael Polanyi's epistemological perspective in *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); and *The Tacit Dimension*, (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1983).

form from lower to higher orders of life along a continuous line of intention or development.”<sup>15</sup> This pattern occurs in every context of nature and human life whenever “within a given frame of reference or experience, hidden orders of coherence and meaning emerge to replace or alter the axioms of the given frame and reorder its elements accordingly.”<sup>16</sup> In short, transformation is the process whereby the present gestalt (psychological, biological, sociological, or spiritual) is destroyed as a new and meaningful order emerges.<sup>17</sup>

Transformation, as we are referring to it, is different from incremental change whereby things are added to or subtracted from a given system without structurally reordering it. In Harold’s case, up to the moment of his accident, he was adding new research and experiences to his existing convictional framework without it changing structurally. But the medical crisis coupled with his existential crisis contributed to the conditions whereby over time his convictions about himself, the church, and his leadership were reoriented and reconstituted into a new worldview or, with respect to Thomas Kuhn, a new paradigm. It is important to realize that during his emergency and convalescence, Harold’s transformation did not only come about by “learning” something new and adding a bit of knowledge to his mental store. A vastly different vision of reality, a

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<sup>15</sup> James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment: Understanding the Convictional Experiences*, 2nd ed., (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard Publishing, 1989), 38.

<sup>16</sup> James E. Loder and Jim W. Neidhardt, *The Knights Move: The Relational Logic of the Spirit in Theology and Science* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard Publishing, 1992), 316. Here transformation is conceived as a more positive transition from one form to another. However, it should be noted that transformations are not necessarily positive; e.g., as a terminal illness progresses to its inevitable conclusion. Examples of transformation in the natural and human realms could be listed infinitely, but here are three to demonstrate the fact that transformation is indeed transposed across the entire range of natural and human existence: the change in form as a caterpillar changes into a butterfly; the redirection of entropy in open and dissipative systems (Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984); the movement from one stage of psychological development to another (whether Kohlberg’s moral states, Fowler’s faith stages, or Erikson’s epigenetic stages). Cf., Loder, *The Transforming Moment*, 42 and *Logic*, 248.

<sup>17</sup> Transformation can be either positive or negative, but in this essay we will be using the term redemptive transformation to designate a positive transformation that arises from an encounter with the holy and evidences itself in the fruit of the Spirit, named above, as well as greater ego function as it is better able to handle increased complexity.

*theological* vision of reality, emerged within him and over time transformed his vocational understandings and practice both conceptually and experientially. Harold's reorientation to a new way of understanding and acting in the world may have been precipitated within a highly charged situation, but his insight was clarified and worked out day-to-day during the months and years following. This makes the transformative process potentially very long-term. While we might focus on the extreme elements of Harold's crisis, it is important to realize that transformation includes not only the momentary flash of insight but also the sustained disequilibrium leading up to the insight as well as the subsequent process of working it out in new thinking and practices. It is this overall pattern of *redemptive transformation*, and the convictional knowing that takes root within it, that we want to explore for its significance to practical theology and the theological practice of leadership.

## THE TRANSFORMATIONAL PATTERN OF CONVICTIONAL KNOWING

Drawing upon the natural and social sciences, as well as from semiotics and esthetics, Loder identified five interrelated stages that together constitute the transformational process.<sup>18</sup> But lest we get the impression that transformation is a tidy process of moving from one discrete stage to another, we should remember that we are talking about life and knowing, which hardly if ever can be neatly compartmentalized. No, the process of living is messy and so is the transformational pattern of convictional knowing.<sup>19</sup> Yet, there are discernable

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<sup>18</sup> See especially Loder, *The Transforming Moment*, chapter 5.

<sup>19</sup> The perspective of this essay does not equate knowing with mental processes alone. Rather, following scientist-epistemologist Michael Polanyi, knowing is fundamentally participatory and involves the whole person, as a psychosomatic-social unity that includes mental, physical, and spiritual indwelling *among* knowers.

The concept of ego is not easy to pin down, given the range of and variety among psychological theories, but in many perspectives, especially analytic, objective relations, and cognitive psychologies, the ego is basically conceived as the directive agency of the personality. It may be helpful to think about ego operations in light of the difference between "I" and "me." The ego is the "I" that acts on behalf of the "me." In fact, "I" can act upon "me" as an object, for example, as we direct or reflect upon ourselves. From a Freudian and object relations perspective, we can understand the primary function of the ego as maximizing its satisfaction and survival. It is essentially a conservative

phases or stages within the pattern, and if we come to greater clarity about them, we will be better able to acknowledge, accept, and enter into the transformative process.

Because we are concerned here with the leadership of persons, I will briefly explain the pattern of transformation as it relates to human thinking and doing, especially our theologically attuned praxis. The transformational pattern begins simply enough with an initial sense of disruption or conflict within our relatively stable world. It may be that we learn something new that challenges what we already know or we experience something that shakes our very foundations. In Harold's case, it would be inaccurate to say that prior to his accident, his life was completely stable and changeless. But obviously the accident affected his life profoundly, not only physically but existentially. As he suffered through the days, weeks, and months of agony and loneliness, questions of irrelevancy and meaninglessness that were heretofore latent rose to the surface, challenging all that he had assumed about himself, the church, and his relation to God.

At first, Harold's eye did not seem to be hurt badly and so they bandaged the cut above the eye and went about their daily life. But when the retina detached with searing pain shooting through his entire body, Harold and his wife frantically sought remedy from the medical expertise they could find. Using every means at their disposal, they *scanned* for a solution that would positively resolve the crisis. This is the second phase of the transformational pattern known as *scanning*. Everyday, we are able to resolve little problems that pop up such as missing keys and forgotten names, and we go on our merry way without a second thought. But as the problems become more intractable and as they become more and more threatening to our identity and sense of meaning, perhaps even to our very life, the energy and passion we devote to the conflict increases dramatically. For Harold the existential import of his medical crisis was off the chart, for the chances of losing his eye, and indeed all of his eyesight, were great. But when the medical issues were resolved over time through surgery and recuperation, the most existentially potent issues revolved around his vocation and his sense of identity and purpose. These issues could not be resolved through his own effort, by the power of his ego, for they



involved not just himself, but the extent to which he was useful and valued by the congregation. Moreover, his vocational crisis was not just about his relation to the congregation, but much more importantly, it centered on his relation to God. He questioned whether he was really called by God to ministry, especially since he had not been able to leave his former congregations in a state of stability and health. He asked himself over and over whether he had deluded himself into thinking God had ever called him personally into ministry of Word and Sacrament. And of course, this kind of heart-wrenching, self-interrogation inevitably leads to the suspicion that everything one once believed about God and experienced of God might also be illusory.

It is here, in the second stage of the transformational pattern that we come to see the crux of convictional knowing in the struggle within the ego against personal vulnerability and ultimate mortality.<sup>20</sup> The harder we strive to protect ourselves from all sorts of pain and suffering and ultimately our own death, we inevitably resort to defensive and repressive strategies to ward off our awareness of the threat of non-being. Yet, just as the ego strives to protect itself from all sorts of existential negation, it also represses and distances itself from another reminder of its radical contingency: the transcendent Ground of Being in which we live and move and have our being. Repression is in effect a turning away, a hiding, a denial of reality. And our repressive strategies are not unlike the futile efforts of Adam and Eve to hide themselves from God and cover their natural vulnerability. Repression and denial existentially separate us from the divine life in all things including ourselves. Existential separation from God is also known by another term, sin.

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psychosocial agency that is concerned above all things with its own survival (in lower developmental stages of Lawrence Kohlberg, Erik Erikson, and James Fowler, satisfaction is subordinate to survival). This is an important and essential feature of human psychological development for which we should be very grateful, for it helps keep us alive. However, the ego carries out its protective task by repressing the fact of its vulnerability, its tenuous existence, and ultimately its mortality. It tries its best to whistle in the dark and to look away from the ever-present specter of negation and death at the center of existence. Most of the time we are unaware of the mighty struggle that the ego is waging against both the demons and angels who would unseat and decenter it from its supremacy.

Against demons and angels the ego struggles to survive as central and supreme in the psyche. Yet, in order for the personality to be authentic to its own radical contingency, what the ego desperately requires is to be “grounded transparently in the Power that posits it,” as Kierkegaard has so eloquently put it. This is something that the ego cannot do on its own. It cannot will a complete reordering and reorientation of the mental structures of the personality, for that would, in effect, be the undoing of the ego as it knows itself. Psychological transformation of the structures of the personality deconstructs the ego. That is why existential and religious conversions always feel as though they come upon us from the outside or arise from somewhere deep within us. We feel as though we are acted upon by a force that is not of our own making. Transformation of the psychic structures comes from outside the “I,” beyond conscious agency of the person (or group). Whence transformation arises is a subject we will take up in a few moments. But for now, suffice it to reiterate the heroic stature of the ego and its power, but also the inherent inability of the ego to reconstitute itself within a more comprehensive and ontologically-grounded gestalt that includes both its existential negation and salvation. Ego agency may be competent and it may be powerful; but it cannot redemptively re-create itself.

Within the second stage of scanning for a resolution to existential disequilibrium, to the extent that the felt conflict involves a deepening existential crisis and that the resolution cannot be found within the normal defensive patterns of the ego’s agency, how are existential struggles resolved? When the conflict that the ego faces is its own death, whence comes redemption? The answer, avers Loder, lies beyond self, world, and even the existential void. From a Kierkegaardian perspective, the answer to life’s most trenchant questions lies neither in what we can do for ourselves, nor in what we can get from others, nor does it end nihilistically in death and our own non-being; rather, the answer “is intrinsic to our selfhood”:

We continue to live precisely because in the center of the self, for all of its potential perversity, we experience again and again the reversal of those influences that invite despair and drive toward void.

Kierkegaard repeatedly insisted with bewildering brilliance that the faces of the void become the faces of God.<sup>21</sup>

At the very heart of Loder's expansive practical theology is an incarnational affirmation that indeed we do live and move and have our being in God. Within and beyond the dimensions of the self, world, and their negation is a fourth and more fundamental dimension, which Loder refers to simply as the Holy, the "*Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*."<sup>22</sup> The conviction that God is both at the very center of our existence and beyond it<sup>23</sup>-that we are constantly and ultimately sustained by the Creator Spirit by whose *Logos* all things are created and in whom all things are reconciled and will find their ultimate destiny-is the hope that negates our despair of the void within ourselves and our world.

So far we have said that the five fold transformational pattern begins with disruption and continues as we search for possible solutions. It is important to realize that the scope and intensity of the psychological and spiritual transformation we are concerned with at present corresponds to the intensity of the passion with which we strive for resolution. A reordering of the basic structures of our personality only come about when those very structures cannot satisfy our need and passion for resolution.<sup>24</sup> But eventually, if the problem is intractable, and if despite our best efforts we cannot find a resolution to it, we will come to the end of what the ego can

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<sup>21</sup> Loder, *The Transforming Moment*, 90.

<sup>22</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, tran. John W. Harvey (London: Pelican Books, 1959).

<sup>23</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg speaks of the centricity (infinite immanence) and exo-centricity (infinite transcendence) of God with respect to our existence. Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rodgers have described the transformation of organizations in a very similar manner:

It is forced, by the sheer meaningfulness of the information, to let go of its present beliefs, structures, patterns, values. It cannot use its past to make sense of this new information. The system must truly let go, plunging itself into a state of confusion and uncertainty that feels like chaos, a state that always feels terrible.

"Bringing Life to Organizational Change," *Journal for Strategic Performance Measurement*, April/May 1998, accessed at <http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/life.html>.

do. Fortunately, that is not the end of the road for Harold nor is it the end of what our psyche is prepared to do. In the scanning phase, the ego may be the most explicit actor on the stage, but behind the scenes the mind is still working tacitly, trying to discern a deeper truth that puts the pieces of the crisis together in a new way.

Indeed, the tacit and creative working of the unconscious mind is the source by which eventually a transformative resolution may emerge. But for this to happen, the ego has to relax control and bow in submission. In Harold's situation, while he was in the solitary confinement of his darkened room, with demons of despair whispering in his ear, his mind was racing trying to work its way out of the crisis of faith. But that fateful Christmas Eve, Harold was led from his isolation into a new world in which the music and reading and ritual reminded him afresh of the surprising ways that the divine life is manifest in the world. And at the end of that night's pageantry, the Word of God came to Harold enfleshed and enacted as the congregation gathered around him in sincere and glad embrace. Harold knew at that moment that angels were visiting him and that the communion he shared with that Body of Christ was more real and true than his doubts and fears. What emerged for him at that moment was not a blinding vision or flash of insight, but rather he sensed a wholeness and acceptance in which he was held beyond his own power, and he gave himself to it. This moment conveyed to him an intimation of a resolution that would slowly work itself out over the next months and years.

Harold's experience in the Christmas Eve service illustrates the third stage in the transformational process. As the ego gives way, either by willing or unwilling submission, a "constructive act of the imagination" produces "an insight, intuition, vision ... with convincing force, [conveying] the essence of resolution."<sup>25</sup> The moment of "Aha!" (for Harold,

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<sup>25</sup> *Transforming Moment*, p. 32. Again, Wheatley and Kellner-Rodgers' description of this process in organizations resonates positively:

"having fallen apart, having let go of who it has been, the system now is capable of reorganizing itself to a new mode of being. It is, finally, open to change. It begins to reorganize around new interpretations, new meaning. It re-creates itself around new understandings of what's real and what's important. It becomes different because it understands the world differently. It becomes new because it was forced to let go of the old. And like all living systems,

the feeling might have been more “Ahhhh...” signals the turning point of the knowing event in which previously incompatible frames of reference are reconstituted, reframed, reordered into a meaningful unity and resolves the felt sense of incongruity. This intuitive sense of a greater whole constitutes a new frame of reference that dawns upon the individual with the force of great conviction. It is this act of the imagination as it intuits a more fundamental reality and its eruption as a convicting insight that discloses a new perspective or worldview. In Harold’s experience, it was after the Christmas Eve service that Harold’s despair was negated and his sense of identity and vocation was transformed by the warm and eager embrace of the divine life in the Auburn communion.

So far we have covered the first three stages of the transformational pattern: disruption, scanning, and the constructive act of the imagination in which an insight of conviction constitutes the turning point of the knowing event by which elements of the knowing event are transformed. Often, as in Harold’s case this process occurs through great struggle or momentous crisis; but perhaps even more often, the movement through disruption, scanning, and insight occurs over long periods of time, without our awareness.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps it is through spiritual disciplines of prayer or bible study, perhaps as we become more involved in mission or service that the foundations of our worldview shift ever so imperceptibly. As we look back over the years, we find that we have become very different persons because of our experiences, our thinking, and the changes in our convictions. Whether sudden and sensational or evolutionary, whenever the fundamental axioms of our life are reconstituted and reordered through an emerging vision or conviction that resolves a trenchant conflict, we have experienced a transformation in the convictional framework of our life.

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paradoxically it has changed because it was the only way it saw to preserve itself.” (“Bringing Life to Organizational Change”)

<sup>26</sup> Studying the extreme conditions of crisis helps to sharpen definitive elements of the transformational process. However, one of the drawbacks of doing so is giving the impression that transformation is a momentary and sensational experience that can be neatly identified and categorized.

The fourth and fifth stages of the transformational pattern concern the working out of the salvation we experience in the first three. Briefly stated, as the convictional vision emerges, the person experiences a *release of energy* as defenses against the conflict are no longer needed, and she is opened to a new sense of self and a greater participation in the world. The fifth stage rounds out the pattern as an urge to *make connections* with what has gone before and with others with whom she can share her new perspective. It is as if having been on the mountaintop of convictional knowing and received a transfiguring vision, it is now time to go back into the valley to make sense of the transformative experience and to share the good news. This is exactly what Harold did in the months and years following his medical and existential travail. His leadership style conformed to the exigencies of his recovery and to his vision of an incarnational communion in the congregation. As his leadership style shifted away from being a director to being something like an 'evocateur of the Spirit,' the energy and creativity of the congregation increased, spawning new ministries that flourished without his direct involvement. Also, Harold sought to clarify his experience and new perspective, and he availed himself of the DMin program to that end.

### **CONVICTIONAL KNOWING AND CRITICAL HERMENEUTICS**

Thus far, by way of exploring Harold's story of crisis, conviction, and transformation, we have come to see that it is not enough to characterize practical theology as primarily a method of interpretation (hermeneutics). Certainly, interpretation is essential, but it stands upon a more fundamental dimension of theological knowing that we have called convictional. The pattern by which one's convictional framework is reoriented and restructured, affecting the whole of one's life, is transformational.

I think it is important to maintain the focus of hermeneutics on interpretation and refrain from making it a catch-all synonym for knowing. The process and components of interpretation as an agency of the ego is not to be disparaged or ignored; nor should it be equated with convictional knowing by which the ego is deconstructed and re-established on new ground. But just as the limits of the ego

should be acknowledged, so should the limits of interpretation be acknowledged in order to preserve the distinction between the important work of ego agency and the surrender of the ego to the work of the human spirit and Holy Spirit that is fundamental to Christian faith.

Although critical hermeneutics can indeed contribute to conversion, we should not confuse the interpretative process with the sort of conversion that yields convictional knowing. A transformative conversion reorders the basic framework within which critical hermeneutics operates and to which it contributes. Hermeneutical reflection on one's experience and on the texts of the tradition is grounded in and conditioned by the convictional worldview in and by which one interprets other things. In this way, the hermeneutical dimension of theology is a second-order type of analytical reflection that operates by means of the basic assumptions and beliefs that are generated in and through convictional knowing.

It is important that we look carefully at convictional knowing and the transformational pattern by which persons are reoriented, for it is the transformation itself that reconstituted Harold's use of critical hermeneutics and his leadership within a new paradigm. In the rest of the essay we will move toward integrating *convictional knowing* and critical hermeneutics in practical theology. We will set critical hermeneutics in relation to the more fundamental dimension of practical theology, that of convictional knowing and the transformational pattern by which we are increasingly conformed to the Spirit of Christ.

That critical hermeneutics operates within a framework of meaning that is not its own creation is an important *critical* insight into so-called fundamental practical theologies. If we merely want to understand how Harold Backus *intentionally* conducted his practical theological inquiry into the nature of leadership and the church, we would concentrate on his research, study, and engagement with models of cooperative ministry. But in Harold's case, there is so much more at work. His encounter with the existential void in his life as well as with the incarnate presence of Christ in and through his congregants led to a conversion that transformed the framework of his understandings and practice. For Harold, the transformation of self and vocation made all the difference in

the content and goal of his ministry. It is *within* and by virtue of his new incarnational and sacramental vision of ecclesial collaboration that he set out to reinterpret and reconstruct his project. But it is exactly the emergence of a new vision, a transformative vision, that is left out of most versions of critical, hermeneutical, practical theology.

Yet the relation between interpretation and convictions is not unidirectional; rather, as we noted in Harold's case, his study, reflection, and the whole of his praxis contributed to his vocational crisis. If you recall, Harold studied theological paradigms of leadership and practical models of cooperative ministry. In his study, he found that most of the time top-down models of cooperative ministry failed. And this was exactly the result of the ministries that he had initiated in previous congregational appointments: failure due to the lack of indigenous interest and leadership. Self-reflexively, his critical analysis of his praxis sought out and clarified failures of his praxis, thereby intensifying the transformative potential of the problem he was trying to resolve. Indeed, the extent to which Harold critically correlated his experience with the findings of his research contributed in no small way to the extent to which his medical crisis catalyzed his vocational crisis.

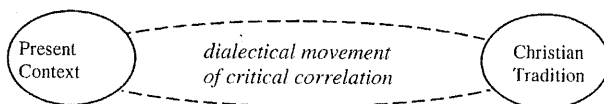
Yet the relation between interpretation and convictional knowing did not end there. Rather, the insight and feeling that convicted Harold during the Christmas Eve service and after was vague and ephemeral. He could have shrugged it off and discredited it as merely an emotional response. But he didn't. He discerned the truth of that convictional moment and sought to clarify and elaborate it intentionally so that the new convictional framework could take root and bear fruit in his ministry. This work of explication is precisely that of critical correlation. Here we note the *cycle of practical theological engagement* such that critical hermeneutics contributes to the potential for convictional transformation which is then worked out by means of critical interpretation.

The figures below represent the difference between a hermeneutical approach to practical theology without a convictional dimension (figure a) and the bipolar correlation of practical hermeneutics connected to the deepening dimension of convictional knowing (figure b). Note that as

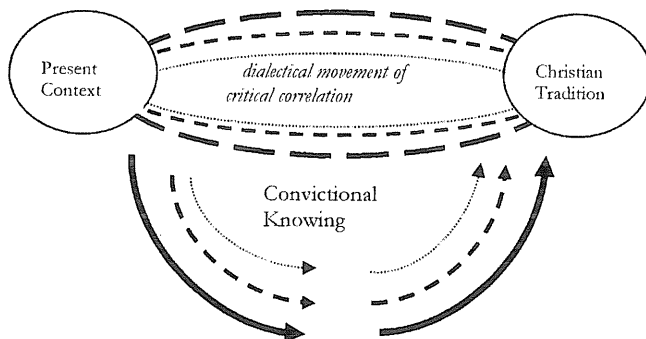


convictional knowing penetrates deeper into reality (the vertical movement by which we push 'deeper' into the divine life and whereby the divine life is manifest sacramentally 'upward' as a eucharistic form of existence<sup>27</sup>, the horizon of interpretation expands as well. This signifies the fact that, according to Loder, as hidden orders emerge transformatively, the person (or community) is endowed with greater ego function to explore, understand, and function in the world. Because the defensive and protective patterns of ego agency are relativized somewhat, persons are better able to move beyond the boundaries or threats against which they were previously struggling. Transformation along the lines of development enhances the capacity of the knower to reach out and to engage more complexity and diversity with greater competence.<sup>28</sup>

Hermeneutical Practical Theology (fig. a)



Practical Theology as Hermeneutical and Convictional Knowing (fig. b)



<sup>27</sup> 'Eucharistic hypostasis' is a term used by John Zizioulas to connote the transformation of individuals from living according to biological necessities into persons-in-communion who are marked by the self-sacrificial love of God which is the nature of the church. *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985) 46-64

<sup>28</sup> Loder, *Logic of the Spirit*, 73.

## THE IMPERATIVE OF CONVICTIONAL KNOWING FOR LEADERSHIP

Before we proceed further, I should take a moment to say what my working definition of leadership is. Definitions of leadership in the church are plentiful, with each emphasizing this or that quality, trait, charisma, or task that is supposed to be essential. As I have tried to think *theologically* about leadership - approaching leadership from a trinitarian and christocentric perspective - two interdependent themes have emerged as central to Christian leadership: a) an ecclesial leader is first and foremost a Christ-conformed *disciple* b) *in whose life* others encounter Christ and sense the meaning of the divine life *in their own*.<sup>29</sup> That is to say, ecclesial leadership should not be understood as a category one puts alongside the category of discipleship; rather, ecclesial leadership is a special form of Christ-like discipleship. Thus, to identify the qualities and charisms of leadership, we should look first for the marks of what is most fundamental: a mutual indwelling of Holy Spirit and human spirit that bears forth the ontology and ministry of Christ and contributes to greater communion in Christ.<sup>30</sup> A reciprocal indwelling of human spirit and Holy Spirit manifests itself as faithfulness and devotion to God (and all things in relation to God) and as spiritual fruits such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc.<sup>31</sup> To identify the exercise of leadership as specifically *Christian*, there needs to be an evident continuity with the fundamental qualities of a life lived in the Spirit: a love of God and of neighbor as self (provided that "love" is active rather than sentimental and that "neighbor" is, according to scriptural accounts of the soteriological scope of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, universally inclusive).

The ultimate goal of the Christian life is to be conformed to exactly this type of mutual indwelling between Creator and created that is disclosed in the person of Jesus Christ, the Logos of God in whom we live, move, and have our being.

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<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that while we may be used to thinking about discipleship and leadership as attributions we lay upon individuals, they can also be attributed to groups, most especially worshipping and missional communities who together bear forth the image of Christ to the world and draw people into its fellowship.

<sup>30</sup> Cf., Romans 8:9-14.

<sup>31</sup> Galatians 5:22; other fruit are included: generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

That is to say, the most fundamental thrust of the Christian life is not merely moral or cognitive or experiential; it is ontological. God wills us to be reconciled in Christ to our true nature as we are created in and through the Word. To imitate Christ in the form and action of our existence is our truest calling. It is the fulfillment of our created nature. To respond faithfully to God, to our life in God-to our radical contingency upon God-is the ultimate goal of the Christian life; it is the most fundamental meaning of discipleship and the ground of and orientation for ecclesial leadership.

At the root of leadership then is discipleship. But not all disciples are leaders. So what particular form of discipleship should we call Christian leadership? To be sure, leadership is different than official positions or titles we may hold. Leadership should also be distinguished from personal characteristics, for not all leaders are charismatic, attractive, or particularly efficient. On the other hand, many people who are well-liked and effective turn out to be terrible leaders. Leadership itself is a quality that transcends this or that trait. Christian leadership is fundamentally a special form of *imitatio Christi*. It is an imitation, not in the sense of a superficially copying another's actions, but rather in the sense of bearing forth Christ as a sacramental event, as an incarnational manifestation of Christ's life and ministry.

More precisely leadership is a relationship in which the leader functions as both a window and a mirror to others: a window through which they see and encounter Christ and a mirror in which they recognize and experience the Spirit of Christ in themselves. Another way of putting it, Christian leadership is *iconic*, a living image of Christ in which others encounter Christ and sense the meaning of the divine life in their own.<sup>32</sup> However else leadership can be described, whatever the tasks or roles or qualities may be attributed to it, if it is to be identified as Christian leadership, it will manifest itself as love and service to God, a loving service in and through which others discover Immanuel.

This way of understanding leadership theologically can be described as incarnational-sacramental. Taking as our point of departure that the unique incarnation of God in Christ reveals

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<sup>32</sup> I develop this idea more fully in "Encountering God in the Image of Christ: Iconic Leadership," *Journal of Religious Leadership* 1:2 (Fall 2002): 83 - 100.

the universal incarnational principle of God's presence and action in the world, we come to understand discipleship as a sacramental form of this universal activity of God: the ordinary means by which the extraordinary (the divine) is manifest. But as I have indicated, ecclesial leadership goes further. Christian leadership is iconic: it is the living image of Christ that calls forth that same image in others.

With this incarnational-sacramental-iconic description of leadership in mind, what then is the principal responsibility of ecclesial leadership (whether individual or group)? According to a hermeneutical paradigm of practical theology, leaders are to describe, analyze, and reconstruct praxis by means of critical reason. I hope to have shown that this is actually a penultimate purpose of theology and of leadership in particular. A more fundamentally practical/ontological theology has as its ultimate *telos* not only an interpretation but *a greater participation in the divine life* so that the truth of our life in God emerges in the forms of vision and praxis for the sake of the redemptive transformation of the world.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR ECCLESIAL LEADERSHIP**

### *1. The convictional ground of visionary leadership.*

Many scholars of secular as well as Christian leadership have rightly asserted that vision is one of the principle qualities and tasks of leadership. This makes perfect sense if we think about leadership as bearing forth the image of Christ for the sake of discipling others. We have said that ecclesial leadership is iconic: in and through the exercise of leadership, others see and encounter Christ and discern the meaning of the divine life within themselves. In the most basic terms, this is similar to what a vision is. Rather than thinking about vision primarily in terms of a 'preferred future', which has an idealistic cast to it, a practical theological vision is of *reality*, the theological reality of our life in Christ as manifest in a particular time, place, and culture. This point bears repeating: a Christian vision is realistic; it penetrates beyond appearances to what is most true ontologically.

If a theological vision is connected to the contact between ourselves and God (and everything in relation to God), then it is quite different from an imaginary vision, the content of which are hopes, dreams, and preferred futures. A theological

vision is primarily ontological and objectively-oriented rather than idealistic. It is the discovery of a hidden order already implicit in reality but previously unknown to us, a discovery of a more profound order that shakes up our current way of thinking, a more fundamental order that re-orders not only what we know (and do) but also who we are. A theological vision of our life in God, in general and specific terms, comes by way of dwelling more deeply in that reality. A vision is the imaginative (not imaginary) emergence of what we have come to know through our contact with reality. And a vision is true to the extent that it faithfully and fully manifests that reality and helps us to penetrate more deeply as a result.<sup>33</sup>

This is why convictional knowing is crucial to visionary leadership; participation puts us in contact with the very thing to which our vision (hopefully) points. Rooted in reality, a theological vision witnesses to the ontological truth of our being. It calls (*vocare*) us to recognize and dwell within it more fully so that the Reign of God draws ever nearer in and through our lives.

As an iconic witness to the truth in which it participates, ecclesial leadership calls people to accept and live into this divine calling. The task of leadership, then, is not so much to act upon and convict others, but to live and proclaim the truth of reality such that others come to know it more fully and are themselves convicted by it.<sup>34</sup> It is not ultimately up to the leader to persuade others to do something they otherwise would not; it is more the responsibility of the people, along with their leaders, to be disciples who seek first the Reign of God, who immerse themselves in and open themselves up to

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<sup>33</sup> Of course, the rub is always the *degree* to which our beliefs are truthfully related to reality. But it should not be missed that this contact between ourselves and external reality is the ontological basis upon which we can be committed to our beliefs about the world even while we acknowledge the inherently limited and fallible, and therefore provisional, status of those beliefs.

<sup>34</sup> In *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1998), Parker J. Palmer writes about "subject-centered education" whereby teacher and students are gathered around a "third thing" - the subject matter, whatever that is - such that it speaks with "an independent voice-a capacity to speak its truth quite apart from the teacher's voice in terms that students can hear and understand. When the great thing [subject] speaks for itself, teachers and students are more likely to come into a genuine learning community, a community that does not collapse into the egos of students or teacher but knows itself accountable to the subject at its core" (118).

divine disclosure in everyday life, to the presence of God within and even beyond their visible horizons.

## 2. *The Convictional Ground of Non-anxious Leadership*

Edwin Friedman and others have shown that a culture of fear and anxiety pervades American society and our churches and generates and sustains unhealthy relational systems in families and social institutions alike. Although Friedman was writing before the horror of 9/11, his observations about anxiety-ridden social interaction are even more pertinent now. Americans are bombarded day after day with announcements of threats not only from foreign sources but from people (terrorists? undocumented aliens? protesters? opposition leaders?) who even now live among us. As we have clearly seen over the past few years, a culture of fear fosters a 'herd' mentality; for protection people circle their wagons around what is familiar and conventional. Yet, circling the wagons gets us nowhere; it only deepens our ruts.

Rabbi Friedman's analysis concludes that the anxiety within North American, and especially American, culture is toxic to leadership.<sup>35</sup> His is an incisive and compelling diagnosis of the way in which a culture of anxiety and fear undercuts not only the exercise of leadership but also the cultivation and emergence of leaders. The bottom line is that just when society most needs leaders who are self-differentiated, who are committed to the health and well-being of the whole, and who rise up to take personal risks and step out from the herd to show the way forward, just when they are needed most, the anxious 'herd' pulls potential leaders down and holds them back. Socially pervasive anxiety cultivates a craving for safety and certainty, for repetition and homogeneity that undercuts the very creative and courageous leadership that has the potential to lead us out of the societal and ecclesial morass in which we are presently mired.

In his seminal *The Courage to Be*, Paul Tillich explored the polarities of anxiety and courage to their theological foundation. Although no panacea exists to solve the problem of anxiety and leadership, Tillich puts his finger on what I understand to be the fundamental issue at stake for leaders

<sup>35</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, Edward W. Beal and Margaret M. Treadwell, eds., (Bethesda, MC: Edwin Friedman Estate/Trust, 1999) 2, passim.

who desperately seek firmer footing. Courage is not grounded ultimately in either looking to the whole of society or in confidence in oneself. Rather, the Reformation proclaimed something else: “one can become confident about one’s existence only after ceasing to base one’s confidence on oneself....It is based on God and solely on God, who is experienced in a unique and personal encounter.” And this encounter is a “state of being grasped by the power of being-itself.”<sup>36</sup> This is the essence of a convictional experience that yields profound and life-changing insight into the One True Power in whom we can be transparently grounded.

Friedman calls for leaders to be self-differentiated, to be able to maintain a stable sense of self that withstands the anxiety of conflict without defensiveness and withstands the pressure of the ‘herd’ through clarity of mind and strength of character. He calls for leaders who through the strength of their convictions are able to accept responsibility and its cost. But Friedman’s writings are long on description and short on prescription; he does not seem to have a sense for how to address the plight of leadership except through a psychotherapeutic relationship.

Although practical theology is no cure-all, its purpose is to help us to encounter the divine life more fully so that we can be more intentional about living faithfully within it. For this reason the spiritual practices of *attentiveness*, (including meditation and contemplation), *intimate* communication (with persons and texts and traditions), and enactment (in terms of worship, service, and mission) should be woven into the very fabric of practical theology and the training of leaders. In short, spiritual disciplines should be at the center of every theological method. For these disciplines prepare us for and lead us into deeper encounter with God. And it is that divine encounter that sustains a mutual indwelling of Spirit and spirit that yields our identity, a truly theological identity, that can sustain us in the midst of a highly charged, anxious society.

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<sup>36</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952) 172, 163.

### *3. The Convictional Ground and Spiritually Formative Methods of Leadership Training*

Seminary education often emphasizes the analytical and critical methods of theological inquiry. And many professors are wary of any show of emotional engagement, especially of the loss of emotional control. We like to keep the process in our heads, under the ever-watchful ego, whose sole objective is to maintain control. But so much of leadership is the exercise of integrity, of courage, of determination. So much of leaders' responsibilities have to do with communicating and living out an impassioned and vibrant vision, exhorting the community to faithfulness in its mission, and discipling others.

A transformation of practical theology into a spiritual discipline of the church for the sake of dwelling more fully in the divine life would mean that spiritual disciplines usually associated with appreciative, meditative, and familiarizing modes of knowing (e.g., repetition, memorization), along with disciplines of compassionate and sacrificial service, would constitute the (non-foundational) foundation for the second-order exercise of instruction and critical reason. There is then a progressive cycle of theological learning whereby we come to know a reality more fully by participating more deeply in it, and that deepening indwelling, in turn, is clarified by critical analysis for the sake of re-engaging reality more fully.

Integrating first-order spiritual disciplines (such as bible study, prayer, and service within a covenantal community) in practical theology and theological education is not only an epistemological imperative that would make them both more credible, it is exactly what leaders need most. For the sake of the spiritual health and practical effectiveness of church leadership, theological methods and training must do more than cultivate critical practical reason vis-à-vis Christian texts and practices; it must cultivate a participatory knowledge of God that evidences itself in, e.g., what Wesleyans call "practical divinity."<sup>37</sup> For only by penetrating more fully into the very realities of the Christian faith are we able to understand what the texts and practices are referring to. Only

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<sup>37</sup> Cf., Thomas A. Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition*, rev. ed., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).



by participating in the ground and grammar of theology can we critically assess the meaning and value of the Christian witness so that we can reconstruct adequately our participatory and productive praxis.

In the past few years I have become convinced that meditation is a fundamental skill for leaders. In almost every leadership course I teach, we meditate for 30-40 minutes and then we talk about the relation of meditation to life and leadership. Most students are perplexed, and a few are outright hostile to the practice. But meditation is introduced by asking about some of the most difficult situations that the students have faced in their ministry so far. Invariably, they name a few all-too-common situations including: interpersonal conflict, encountering tragic death or oppressive suffering, and the lack of self-control over personal feelings and urges. As we discuss these kinds of situations, it becomes apparent that a great deal of the difficulty with which they struggle lies within themselves, and it has to do with their anxious reactivity in the situation. In the face of threats, automatic defenses kick in, and the only viable options seem to be “flight or fight.” Fear exacerbates whatever negative dynamics are at play. It shuts us down and narrows our attention to the most pressing threats. But as we are preoccupied with our own survival, we are unable to be open to the Holy which is on the other side of our existential negation. So fixated on the void, it eclipses God, and idolatrously, we fear and revere the void more than God.

In a helpful essay, F. LeRon Shults asks, “What keeps seminarians [and by implication, all ecclesial leaders] from transformational learning?” The *psychological* answer, he avers, is too much fear. And while taking the psychological dimension seriously, Shults continues to the *theological* answer: “*not enough fear.*” That is, fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge, and according to Proverbs 19:23 (NIV), “The fear of the Lord leads to life.”<sup>38</sup> But as with most things theological, the meaning of “fear” as it relates to God is counter-intuitive. Fearing God does not debilitate us, but rather because God is Love, fear of God becomes life-giving:

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<sup>38</sup> F. LeRon Shults, “Pedagogy of the Repressed: What Keeps Seminarians from Transformational Learning?”, *Theological Education*, 36:1 (1999): 161-164.

When God is the object of fear (and so, in this sense, the beloved)....we have to do with the constitutive presence of the truly infinite and eternal Creator, whose love is the basis of the existence of the self and its lived world, whose creative activity *eo ipso* operates by overcoming the void (*ex nihilo*). When the divine source of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful is the object of fear, recognition of the unmanipulability of *this* object evokes faith and hope. Human love of God includes the element of fear, but it is transformed infinitely into the terrific delight of worship, not merely a worship that is ritualistically compartmentalized, but a worship that constitutes the whole of one's identity in the lived world as it is offered to the Holy (Romans 12:1).<sup>39</sup>

If God comes to us from within and from without as wholly Other, then the first step to a proper fear of God is an openness to whatever form the divine presence may take. And because God is wholly Other, we should expect that a divine manifestation should surprise us. The main point of meditating for mindfulness is to train the mind to be open to the awesome and fascinating disclosure of the divine life, however it should manifest itself. In this respect, meditation does not distance one from reality, does not close one off from reality, but rather trains us to be attentive and aware of everything, to keep our lamps burning, as it were, so that we do not miss a divine visitation. Meditation becomes, then, one of many spiritual practices that enable us to indwell the ground and grammar of the divine life, not so that we can master and control it, not so that we grow comfortable with it. Rather, we indwell it so that we are more fully indwelt by it.

#### 4. *The Convictional Ground and Vocational Impulse of Leadership*

Transformative insights are mysterious; they are products of the tacit operations in the 'back' of one's mind.<sup>40</sup> Because convictional knowing arises through the tacit operations of the mind, no one can predict or control when someone (or group) will experience a spontaneous emergence of a hidden

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>40</sup> Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*.

order. Even the *attempt* to predict or control it can easily disrupt the transformative process because the anxiety beneath our desire for control impedes the spontaneous eruption of convictional insight. Anxiety prods the ego to clamp down on mental functions for the sake of keeping the “I” in charge, avoiding or denying existential threats, and maintaining the status quo. Transformation is intrinsically a disruption of the ego whereby the very structure of what the ego controls is reorganized, as if from the inside-out. If the transformation is positive and beneficial, paradoxically, the displaced ego is better able to function: to order and control the new gestalt that emerged through transformation. That transformation is a tacit operation and emerges spontaneously should relieve leaders of the mistaken notion that they can change anyone. Profound change is something we can anticipate and prepare for, but it is more a matter of submission to a greater power within and beyond us than our egoistic strivings.

We have here the principle of *vocation* [Latin: *vocare*, to call] that distinguishes Christian leadership from other forms of leadership that impose changes upon others and that exclusively emphasize mastery and action.<sup>41</sup> *Vocare* also distinguishes leadership from discipleship: being themselves called, leaders call others to greater discipleship. In word, action, and personal presence, ecclesial leaders (both individuals and groups) not only bear forth the image of Christ, they invoke/evoke/provoke the Spirit of Christ within persons and communities, such that they are more fully transformed by the Spirit into Christ’s likeness as the body and blood of Christ given to and for the world.

## CONCLUSION

Theologically conceived, Christian leadership is not primarily about functioning with greater competence and effectiveness, although competence and effectiveness are good qualities that we want to characterize our leaders. Rather, the primary thrust of Christian leadership is so to dwell in the Spirit of Christ that they function as icons of “Christ in

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41 For a particularly vivid perspective that is preoccupied with mastery and action, see Laurie Beth Jones, *Jesus, CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership* (New York: Hyperion, 1995).

you, the hope of glory.”<sup>42</sup> To function iconically is fundamentally a kenotic or self-emptying exercise whereby we lose our lives in order to find them given back to us transformed.

Kenotic self-emptying and competent ego function are not necessarily mutually antagonistic. The life of Jesus Christ demonstrated that. But surrendering and mastery are indeed actions that are paradoxically related. The mystery of their relation is bound up in the mystery of redemptive transformation whereby what we thought to be true dissolves, and hidden orders of new meaning emerge to reconstitute our self-understanding and sense of reality. It is, in essence, a baptism in Christ whereby we are resurrected anew through the Spirit for the sake of the redemptive, reconciliative mission of God in the world.

Christians need to know that leadership is a manifestation of the sacramental truth of life in Christ, and leaders need to be theologically trained to live more fully into their sacramental calling. If theology is fundamentally practical, that is, if it has to do ultimately with the reality of our existence, and if our existence is wholly contingent upon God, then a fundamental practical theology will drive us to greater encounter and awareness of that inheritance we share with Christ. As such practical theology is more than interpretation and it is more than reflective action. Theologically oriented, it ‘vocates’ a spirit-to-Spirit engagement and within such engagement generates ecclesial life. Not just a method of interpretation or more effective action, practical theology is a vocational imperative: calling all persons to greater understanding of and participation in the divine life such that the Reign of God is more fully manifest in and through us.

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42 Colossians 1:27, NIV.

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