
**A GRAIN OF WHEAT: TOWARD A THEOLOGICAL
ANTHROPOLOGY FOR LEADING CHANGE IN MINISTRY**
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Abstract

Theories on leadership, in their capacity of suggesting a vision of a preferred future, implicitly make theological claims, and explicitly challenge theological imagination. Based on the analysis of the (implicit) anthropological telos in theories on leading change in secular and theological works, this article challenges the assumption of these theories by envisioning a theological anthropology for leading change in ministry. This vision focuses on the historicity and plasticity of human beings and the metaphor of the grain of wheat (John 12:24) as fundamental modes for leading change with human beings. In Christian theology, these modes of change are inscribed in the sacramental and Christological narrative of the reality and promise of change through resurrection.

Leading Change Means People Have to Change

As a missionary in the former Soviet republic of Estonia by the Baltic Sea, I was leading a youth Easter retreat at an idyllic campsite somewhere in the countryside in the middle of the 1990s. During one of the silent meditation hours on Good Friday, I was walking alongside a river together with a small group of young people. Suddenly we discovered something in the river. At first we did not realize what it was, but as we came closer we realized there was a dead body in the river—an old woman.

Later that same afternoon, we were preparing to reenact the drama of Good Friday. One young person was supposed to be Pontius Pilate, one Judas, one Jesus,

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one Mary, others some of the disciples. The police had just informed us that the murdered woman had been killed by her drunken son during a family quarrel. The son was now in custody, so we had nothing to fear. Still, the scene of the Easter drama had changed. The reality of death had drawn closer.

Being a church is being in the business of change. As a leader in ministry, one has to learn to appreciate and live with change. All in all, ministry is a laboratory for change, much because it works with a vision of what a better future looks like. Therefore, leadership in ministry is about leading change. The problem is that people tend not to like surprises caused by change, and surprised people tend to behave badly. This problem has to do with the fact that change, in particular more demanding and discontinuous change, what Ronald Heifetz calls *adaptive change*, involves changing human beings one way or the other. Heifetz, distinguishing between technical and adaptive change, finds that an adaptive challenge “consists of a gap between the shared values people hold and the reality of their lives, or of a conflict among people in a community over values and strategy.”¹ Adaptive change, therefore, always seems to increase anxiety.² Change taking place in one part of the congregation, for instance youth ministry, often seems to create anxiety for the congregation as a whole. Whereas youth ministry may excel in the practice of handling change, the problem is often that many congregations want growth, but not change, and they do not realize that the two are inseparable.³ What makes change scarier than

¹ Ron A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), 254. Heifetz also warns that “adaptive change becomes a high-risk enterprise, however, when we postpone it so long that a revolution becomes necessary.” Heifetz, 275.

² See Gilbert R. Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders* (Herndon, Va.: The Alban Institute, 1998), 160–161.

³ Rendle, 32.

growth is that change for human beings is always an encounter with death as well.

Change, or *metabolè* in Greek, is generally understood as the process of becoming different.⁴ In a society where the adaptive demands are rising, leadership that takes responsibility without waiting for revelation or request is required, and leaders will need to use discernment and experimentation to guide their congregations through changes.⁵ All leadership is rooted in engaging a preferred vision of the future, a *telos*, which is Greek and means “end,” “goal,” or “purpose.” Since the 1990s, there has been an emerging interest in developing theories on leading change, both from the perspective of organizational theory and business studies and from the perspective of congregational studies.⁶ What all these books on leading change have in common is that they seem to imply that people are really able to change. It is strongly emphasized that change means changing human beings, and that in order to change a culture or a structure, people’s behavior, attitudes, and skills need to change.⁷ But there is surprisingly little reflection on what the *telos*, the preferred future vision of adaptive, anthropological change, looks like.⁸

⁴ There are of course different types of change: change as absolute identity, qualitative or quantitative change, and change as addition or subtraction, namely local or formal change. All change takes place in time and space. The opposite of change is *inertia*—inactivity or rest.

⁵ See Heifetz, 276; Rendle, 9.

⁶ See Kotter and Heifetz; Gary Yukl, *Leadership in Organization*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2010); Robert E. Quinn, *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996). In the realm of congregational leadership, see Rendle; Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr, *Leading Congregational Change: A Practical Guide for the Transformational Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000); Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2006). Even in one of the first classics on leadership, leadership is interpreted as something that is directed toward intended change. See James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers), 448, 461.

⁷ Heifetz, 87.

⁸ Interestingly, one of the few books that engages biblical theology with theories on leadership seems to use the biblical material merely as resource

By its focus on what a preferred future looks like, theories on leadership implicitly make theological claims and explicitly challenge theological imagination. This article seeks to develop a response to these claims from the perspective of theological anthropology. The first part of the article briefly analyzes the implicit and explicit anthropology in theories on leading change in organizations and congregations. The major part of the article seeks to develop a response to this analysis, by envisioning a theological anthropology for leading change in ministry. The question or problem this article seeks to answer is therefore twofold: What is the (implicit) anthropological telos in theories on leading change, and what should an anthropological *telos* for leading change in ministry look like? *Leadership* refers to “the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives.”⁹ The term *anthropology* and the term *anthropological telos* refer to how the two fundamental questions, Who or what is a human being? and What is the ultimate goal of human change? are answered, explicitly or implicitly. Theological anthropology has to do with how the same two questions should be interpreted theologically.¹⁰

material or analogies for leadership strategies: see Robert D. Dale, *Leading Edge: Leadership Strategies from the New Testament* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1996).

⁹ Yukl, 26.

¹⁰ Theological anthropology has migrated between different doctrinal homes—the doctrine of creation (traditionally), the doctrine of incarnate grace (Barth and Rahner), the doctrine of eschatology (Wolfhart Pannenberg), and the doctrine of the Trinity (John Zizioulas). See David H. Kelsey, “Human Nature” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 122–123. German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg claims that we live in an age of anthropology, where a large range of sciences—sociology, psychology, physics, biology, and more—contribute to constructing a new, comprehensive understanding of humanity. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *What Is Man? Contemporary Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, D.A. Priebe, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 138. My focus on

The basic claim in the article is that the theological *telos* of anthropological change finds its ultimate response in the hope of resurrection, and since this is the case, the *telos* of anthropological change is fundamentally a hope for a new creation. German theologian Jürgen Moltmann finds that “the kingdom of God can mean no less than resurrection and new creation, and hope in the kingdom can be satisfied with no less than this.” This hope is also fundamentally imbedded in a *collective telos*, emphasizing that the biblical hope of the resurrection from the dead is a collective term. It is not something that will happen to each individual by himself or herself; therefore, the theological *telos* of anthropological *change* also leads to solidarity with all of creation, (Rom. 8:22).¹¹ The vision of the preferred future in the light of Christian anthropological eschatology is therefore not a maximized version of oneself (the visional leader), but it is Christ as the other, which draws all of creation to himself.

theological anthropology in this article is not to underestimate the importance of systemic theory, sociology, organizational theory, psychology, coaching, and (God knows), many other sciences and their importance for theories on leading congregational change, but this article seeks to help overcome what seems to be a blind spot in many of the theories on leading congregational change, namely the importance of (theological) anthropology for theories on leading change. German theologian Jürgen Moltmann claims that Christian anthropology, the task of answering Who or what is a human being? does not make biological, cultural, and religious anthropology superfluous, but it can also not be reduced to them. See Jürgen Moltmann, *Man. Christian Anthropology in the Conflict of the Present*, J. Sturdy, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 21.

¹¹ Pannenberg, *What Is Man*, 138. Death as the ultimate anthropological category for change seems utterly individual, at the same time—finitude is something all human beings have in common; see here Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 223. In the light of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection and the hope of resurrection through the coming of the kingdom, Moltmann argues for engaging what he labels the creative discipleship of love over a more conservative reading of Protestant vocational ethics. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 329–34.

The Anthropological *telos* in Works on Leading Change

Explicit and implicit anthropological claims can be found in the seminal work *Leading Change*, by John Kotter, which outlines an actionable eight-step process for implementing successful change.¹² Kotter's book is important, because it, along with most other texts on leading change, describes human change, both as a group and as individuals, through optimistic, biological metaphors: human growth is something natural. One chief metaphor is the idea of human beings as systems in need of balance.¹³ But Kotter also points out that growth and change may hurt, stressing, that "whenever human communities are forced to adjust to shifting conditions, pain is ever present."¹⁴ Kotter even finds that transformation or change may become difficult because of human misdeeds such as arrogance and insularity coupled with the lack of leadership.¹⁵ According to Kotter, leadership is by nature something that is grounded in a future vision: "Leadership defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that vision, and inspires them to make it happen despite obstacles."¹⁶ Kotter here develops a sort of secular and pragmatic eschatology. It is a strictly functional eschatology, where the ultimate end is to maximize human performance and effectiveness.¹⁷

What books on leading change in ministry have in common is that they make use of secular theories on leading change. In *Leading Change in the Congregation*, Gilbert Rendle makes use of Ronald Heifetz's distinction between technical and adaptive change.¹⁸ In *Leading*

¹² See how Gary Yukl acknowledges the importance of Kotter's seminal work, *Leading Change*, see also Yukl 308, 311, 315.

¹³ Yukl, 302. For examples of the same use of biological metaphors like *equilibrium* or *organic individuals*, see also Quinn, xiii, 166, 167.

¹⁴ Kotter, 4.

¹⁵ Kotter, 29.

¹⁶ Kotter, 25.

¹⁷ "Without a sense of urgency, people won't give that extra effort that is often essential." Kotter, 6.

¹⁸ Rendle, 41–46.

Congregational Change, by Jim Herrington, Mike Bonem, and James H. Furr, several references are made to John Kotter's work with leading change.¹⁹ References also are made to transformational/transformative leadership and the work of Burns and Bass.²⁰ Even in *The Missional Leader*, by Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, several references are made to the classics, such as Heifetz.²¹ But what is the anthropological *rationale* behind the theories on leading change in a congregation, and does this rationale differ from those of the secular theories?

Even in these books on leading congregational change, the dominating metaphors describing human beings come from the realm of biology. In *Leading Change in the Congregation*, it is maintained that "when we view a congregation as an organism, we try to understand how things come together to give it life rather than taking them apart to see what might be broken."²² The use of metaphors and images such as *organism* and *give it life* emphasizes a move from a structural, mechanistic view of the congregation to a biological and organic view of what we may call the *communitarian anthropology* of a congregation.²³ Rendle, based on images and examples from nature, even claims that the changing organism, the congregation, as a whole, has inherent resources to tackle change in itself.²⁴ Rendle roots this notion in a biblical reading of 1 Corinthians 12 addressing the importance of

¹⁹ Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, 5, 62, 89.

²⁰ Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, 96.

²¹ Roxburgh and Romanuk, 25, 98.

²² Rendle, 55. Rendle on the following pages explicitly uses images and examples from nature, like a termite: see Rendle, 56–57.

²³ Another example of such a communitarian-oriented anthropology is found in how Rendle distances himself from a mechanistic worldview, where planning teams typically do all the necessary and most important work in isolation: see Rendle, 69. In a way, Rendle's proposed anthropology is optimistic in its communitarian features, as he claims that "the hive, colony, or group—demonstrates a consciousness or wisdom that goes beyond the capacity or intelligence of any one individual animal in the collective," Rendle, 57–58.

²⁴ Rendle, 57.

the wholeness of the body of Christ, or as Rendle points out, “faith is expressed in wholeness.”²⁵

In *Leading Congregational Change*, however, change, as a phenomenon, is also related to the doctrine of sin, or rather to how God’s gift of grace in the forgiveness of sins may bring about change.²⁶ It is emphasized that people learn in different ways, and that personality is important when communicating change and the vision of change and transformation.²⁷ Hints are even given of what one might call a slower and more complex anthropology. Change in the congregation is a slow process, because deep changes, such as changing the underlying corporate attitudes and practices, such as the structures and mental models of the congregation, naturally take time.²⁸ For Roxburgh and Romanuk in *The Missional Leader*, the leader’s character is at the core of what is required to cultivate missional change in a local church. Therefore, virtues like self-awareness, authenticity, and maturity become important.²⁹

What all these books have in common is a focus on how a process of change or transformation should be interpreted and dealt with as a *spiritual process*, where discerning how God is at work is one of the main tasks for a faithful congregational leader. In *Leading Congregational Change*, it is emphasized that “the change process ultimately revolves around the clear discernment and articulation of God’s vision for the congregation.”³⁰ The importance of the constant practice of spiritual disciplines is underlined as a personal preparation for bringing about transformation and change. The authors even claim that lasting transformation will not occur unless leaders spend significant time seeking God’s

²⁵ Rendle, 71.

²⁶ Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, 19.

²⁷ Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, 63.

²⁸ Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, 160.

²⁹ Roxburgh and Romanuk, 141. They also state that it is important to take into account the biblical foundations for change, although this reflection is not developed in any detail. Roxburgh and Romanuk, 180–82.

³⁰ Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, 49.

direction through practices like prayer, Bible study, fasting, and solitude.³¹ In *Leading Change in the Congregation*, it is stressed that “leaders in congregations need to remember that some of their most essential learnings will come from their Bible study and not from their budget reports.”³²

In *The Missional Leader*, God is made the subject of the process of change.³³ Roxburgh and Romanuk find that there has been a turn in congregational leadership from the model of pastoral leadership to the model of entrepreneurial leadership. They, however, would promote the model of the leader as a *cultivator*, someone who seeks to cultivate an environment that discerns what the Spirit of God is doing among the congregation and in its context.³⁴ Based on this focus on congregational leadership as a spiritual process, it is surprising that these theories on congregational change almost consequently fail to address the theological *telos* of (anthropological) change in any depth.

If we compare the implicitly and explicitly expressed anthropology in secular and theological works on leading change, we find that:

- Both tend to characterize human beings with the help of biological metaphors.
- Both make use of psychological insights.
- Both hint of a more realistic or complex anthropology as an important interpretive tool in leading processes of change, but the books on leading change in ministry do not develop this theme theologically.

³¹ Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, 31.

³² Rendle, 23.

³³ “Missional leaders must learn how to discern what God is doing in, through, and among all the movements of change in which a congregation finds itself.” Roxburgh and Romanuk, 24. Here is also an obvious difference between Kotter and books on congregational change. Kotter does not emphasize leadership as spiritual leadership; see, for instance, “planning versus praying for results.” Kotter, 124.

³⁴ Roxburgh and Romanuk, 27–28.

- Secular works on leading change include elements of a functional, secular eschatology.
- In secular works on leading change, change is pictured as something made by human beings.³⁵ Change in relation to congregational change is something out of the control of humans, as Roxburgh and Romanuk would put it. It is really God's change.

Another similarity is the focus on personal integrity and virtues in bringing forth change. This focus is implicitly or explicitly rooted in the Neo-Aristotelian, habitually oriented virtue ethics, which focus on bringing forth the process of leading change by releasing the potential in human beings, parallel to the Aristotelian *potentialis-actualis*-scheme. In accordance with this scheme, both secular and congregational books focus on the importance of *practices*. Practices have become a major focus in contemporary works on virtue and human growth, both within theology and moral philosophy, most of them following the seminal work of Alasdair MacIntyre.³⁶

³⁵ Yukl, 326.

³⁶ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1981/1984). Kotter even writes about *practices*: see Kotter, 151, 170. In *The Missional Leader*, the focus on practices and disciplines is evident, although with a critical remark, pointing out to what small extent many pastors and congregational leaders are formed by the habits and practices of the Christian life. Roxburgh and Romanuk, 34. Rendle writes about “disciplines of faith,” and how, in a process of change, it is important to seek clarity “about which disciplines to follow and how to put them into practice.” Rendle, 171. According to Kotter, commitment to excellence is important in binding together a guiding coalition. Kotter, 65. Kotter connects with MacIntyre’s definition of social practices (“standards of excellence”). *Leading Congregational Change* also presents a definition of leading the change process with affinities to MacIntyre’s definition of social practices: “Leaders find ways to increase their capacities in every successful and disappointing experience.” Herrington, Bonem, and Furr, 161. For yet another indirect reference to “practices,” see Quinn, 3. There is not space and time within the framework of this article to discuss this with any further breadth, but I discuss practices theologically in much more depth in Bård Eirik Hallesby Norheim, *Practicing Baptism: Christian Practices and the Presence of Christ* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Imprint, Wipf&Stock Publishers, 2014).

The *Historicity* and *Plasticity* of Human Beings

So, what kind of theological anthropology should be engaged as a response to these findings in order to develop a more comprehensive and profound understanding of the theological *telos* of anthropological change in the context of leading change in ministry? Change is inevitable in the life of a human being,³⁷ and change and development are important features in a Christian anthropology, as both the future and surroundings of human beings are filled with the potential of change.³⁸ For human beings to deal with change, they have to develop the ability to interpret and handle the experience of brokenness and discontinuity, as human beings are both *able to* relate to their surroundings in an interpretive manner and they are to a certain extent *dependent on* these surroundings. The *historicity* of human beings is a key element in developing a theological anthropology for leading change in the congregation. According to John Kotter, people resisting change tend to be a product of their history,³⁹ and implicitly, Kotter also acknowledges the historicity of both organizational processes of change and human beings by maintaining that “major change takes time, sometimes lots of time.”⁴⁰ This assertion connects well with how the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg argues that historical science is the comprehensive science that best pursues concrete change in the life of individuals and of groups of human beings. Therefore, historical science presupposes all other anthropological investigations, as it arrives at the closest approximation to concrete human life.⁴¹ In the light of Christian theology, the historicity of

³⁷ Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Imago Dei: Den teologiske konstruksjonen av menneskets identitet* (Oslo: Gyldendal, Akademisk, 2003), 333.

³⁸ Henriksen, 281.

³⁹ Kotter, 112.

⁴⁰ Kotter, 119.

⁴¹ Pannenberg, 138. Pannenberg elaborates more broadly on the historicity (“Geschichtlichkeit”) of human beings in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropologie in Theologischer Perspektive* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 472–501. Jürgen Moltmann also emphasizes the importance of *historicity* for a

human beings belongs within a greater historical narrative of revelation. Drawing on Pannenberg, the importance of *historicizing* oneself, as a leader and as a congregation, in the process of leading change (in the congregation) becomes crucial.

Acknowledging the *historicity* of human beings is of great value for leading change in congregations. For one thing, it opens up a larger time span in which to interpret a conflict. Telling stories that relate to the historicity of each individual and to the historicity of the congregation also implies acknowledging the importance of different contexts, and it provides the laboratory in which to listen for what the triune God is calling the congregation to do. Theologically, emphasizing the historicity of human beings in processes of change also highlights the importance of the work of the Holy Spirit as (revelation) history. Therefore, stressing, with the help of theological anthropology, the *historicity* of the person and of a congregation does not mean giving in to nostalgia. Rendle points to nostalgia as a main obstacle to congregational change.⁴² Rather, historicizing oneself as a person and as a congregation serves as a cure against nostalgia, as it emphasizes that the past, the present, and the future should be involved in a larger, historical, and contextual analysis. Fundamentally, acknowledging the historicity of human beings helps to relativize conflicts and also underlines that the final *telos* of human change, in the light of Christian eschatology, is beyond human achievement.

Being created in the image of God, human beings are created *relational*. So in addition to *historicity*, the *plasticity* of human beings in processes of leading (human) change is vital. Pannenberg, drawing on Marx's idea of the objectivity of human nature, stresses that human beings

Christian anthropology but gives the future a prerogative: "The whole present situation must be understood in all its historic possibilities and tasks in the light of the future of the truth." Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, J. W. Leitch, trans. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1967), 288.

⁴² Rendle, 137.

in their openness to the world are completely surrendered to the things that encounter them, as they can look back upon themselves from the perspective of these things.⁴³ Drawing on Augustine and the Greek fathers like Gregory of Nyssa, American theologian Kathryn Tanner elaborates this anthropological theme further.⁴⁴ She finds that the reflexive capacities of self-formation mean that human beings can try to reshape themselves in a self-critical fashion, including even desires they cannot help having by nature.⁴⁵ Similar to Pannenberg, Tanner emphasizes that human beings are unusually plastic because they are usually implicated in, and bound up with, their external environments.⁴⁶ Based on these elaborations, Kathryn Tanner makes the Christ-event her crux of arguing that human nature is changeable, as in order to be changed into the divine image through Christ, human beings must have a changeable nature.⁴⁷ The fundamental theological *telos* of anthropological change in the Christian life is, therefore, based on the plasticity of human beings and how “one with Christ, incomprehensible in his divinity, we take on the very incomprehensibility of the divine rather than simply running after it, working to reproduce it in human terms.”⁴⁸

⁴³ Pannenberg, *What Is Man*, 138. Pannenberg sees this “plasticity” (“Weltoffenheit”) as something that makes human beings stand out in comparison to other animals: see also Pannenberg, *Anthropologie in Theologischer Perspektive*, 313, 349. Jürgen Moltman even addresses something that may be labeled the social “plasticity” of human beings: “Modern society is no longer a class society, nor yet a society of callings, but a mobile society with interchangeable workplaces and jobs.” Moltmann, *Man*, 91.

⁴⁴ Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2010). “Becoming a human image of God through the impress of the divine image is just an extreme case of having one’s character made over by relations with what one is not—God, what is most unlike creatures generally.” Tanner, 41.

⁴⁵ Tanner, 47.

⁴⁶ Tanner, 44.

⁴⁷ Tanner, 39.

⁴⁸ Tanner, 56.

The Theological *telos* of Anthropological Change

A theory on the theological *telos* of anthropological change in the context of leading congregational change needs to be rooted in an understanding of human nature as plastic and changeable (Tanner), and the human being as a historical person (Pannenberg). But what is then the *telos* of this change, the future vision of anthropological change? Both secular and congregationally minded works on leading change describe human change through biological metaphors. However, one biological and biblical metaphor is not engaged in any of the theories on congregational change, namely the metaphor of the “grain of wheat.” In the light of the Christ-event, the image of the grain of wheat is an image capturing how Christian anthropology understands the past, the future, and the present: “*I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds*” (John 12:24).

Inherent in the metaphor of the grain of wheat is a certain U-shape to the movement of change. Similarly, there is a certain U-shape in what Gilbert H. Rendle in *Leading Change in the Congregation* labels the “roller coaster of change,” in order to describe how feelings during a process of change may move from the time the change is announced and until the change is lived through.⁴⁹ The cycle of change often starts with more positive feelings, being followed by more difficult feelings and loss of energy.⁵⁰ Rendle finds that this process encompasses eight stages, which all form the U-shaped movement of change:

1. Feeling Unsettled
2. Denying/Resisting
3. Facing the Present Situation
4. Letting Go into the Unknown
5. Envisioning the Desired Future
6. Exploring New Options

⁴⁹ Rendle, 110.

⁵⁰ Rendle, 112.

7. Committing to Action

8. Integrating the Change⁵¹

There is something deeply human about this U-shaped movement. Plato describes a similar U-shaped movement in his treatise *Republic*. The most well-known use is found in the section about the parable of the cave in Republic VII. The parable tells the story of a group of men imprisoned in a subterranean cave-dwelling. They are all wearing chains on their neck, hands, and feet. Because of this stance, they can only look straight ahead at a parade of figures formed on the cave's wall. When one of the men manages to break his bondage and starts climbing his way out of the cave, he finds out that the figures on the cave wall are nothing but two-dimensional shadows of three-dimensional objects. He also discovers that he had been living under the real world. He then returns to the cave and brings the news to his former fellow-prisoners; by this act, he sets them free. The problem, however, is that out of disbelief, the prisoners will resist even to the point of killing him. The descent here is identified as a *topos* of death, whereas the ascent is identified as the move toward new insight and new life. In modern psychology, the term *katabasis* is also sometimes used to describe the depression some young men experience.⁵²

If change is the process of becoming different, dying is the ultimate change, as Plato here also points to. Fundamentally, to have to die, in the light of the symbolic interpretation of human life as *imago Dei*, is the ultimate consequence of our attempt to dissolve the

⁵¹ The problem with the roller coaster of change is that “leaders in congregations quite often tend to hear the feelings and issues on the *left half of the roller coaster* and respond by talking to people (persuading) about the hopes and the actions on the *right half of the roller coaster*.” Rendle, 118. But ultimately the turning point of such a roller coaster of change is not a resolution of all feelings, but a rational decision to stick with it. Rendle, 123.

⁵² Author Robert Bly proposes several reasons for the “catabasis phenomenon,” among them the lack of Western initiation rites, rites of passage, and the lack of strong father figures and role models; see Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book about Men* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2004).

relationship with the infinite. Death constantly reminds us that we are finite and refers us back to that fact.⁵³ From the view of theological anthropology, death is therefore the final point of orientation for an anthropology of leading change. Death as reality fundamentally influences what it means to lead change with human beings.

But there is more. The story of Easter is in many ways a story of a U-shaped movement of change, moving from despair and insecurity through facing the present situation into slowly discovering the new reality of the resurrection. Having played through the drama of Good Friday at the youth Easter retreat in the Estonian countryside, we woke up the next morning still with the feeling of how death, anxiety, and despair had drawn near. We left later that day for the capital, Tallinn. It was a rather silent bus ride. At night we gathered in a church, Peeteli kirik, Bethel's church to celebrate the Easter Vigil. During Soviet rule, the church had been closed and "rebuilt," to put it nicely, in order to serve as a film studio. Now, toward the late 1990s, the church looked more like a big, open tomb than a real church. But from the ruins of the film studio, a new church was rising. Just a year before we gathered for the Easter Vigil, the pastor and some people in the congregation had started a service to reach out to the many street children and troubled families living in the area around Bethel's church. They had also started building a pastoral care center there.⁵⁴ In the dim light of that grey church, we were singing the song we had rehearsed on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, "We shall never die."

In the Christian narrative of change, death does not have the final word. According to Northrop Frye, the great biblical narrative resembles a U-shaped story,

⁵³ Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Finitude and Theological Anthropology: An Interdisciplinary Exploration into Theological Dimensions of Finitude* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2011), 199.

⁵⁴ For more information on the history of Bethel church, visit www.peeteli.com.

moving through death to the hope of resurrection. Therefore, the theological *telos* of anthropological change—be it in the context of congregational leadership or not—is rooted in the U-shaped promise of resurrection. Ultimately, to historicize oneself in the light of the great Christian story means seeing life, and the life of others, as a U-shaped *comedy*.⁵⁵ Even in C. Otto Scharmer's theory on the U-shape of leadership, death and rebirth are articulated as crucial themes in theories on human change. Scharmer appeals to leadership in transformational change as deeper listening, through a five-staged, U-shaped, process of *co-initiating*, *co-sensing*, *co-presencing*, *co-creating*, and *co-evolving*. Even for Scharmer, the U-shape of leading change emphasizes the collective in leading for the emerging future.⁵⁶ The basic argument of this article is that the *historicity* and *plasticity* of human beings is most comprehensively and profoundly addressed through the hope of resurrection.

The U-movement inherent in the image of the grain of wheat resembles how human change, or better, human renewal and transformation, may take place in the light of the resurrection event and the resurrection reality, as is it is described in 1 Corinthians 15 and in 2 Corinthians 4–6. German theologian Jürgen Moltmann also reminds us that in the light of the crucifixion of Christ, God did not begin the future of human beings at the high tides of human progress, but with the humiliated man, Jesus Christ. Therefore, “the Christian hope, in so far as it is Christian, is the hope of those who have no future.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Northrop Frye finds that the “entire Bible, viewed as ‘divine comedy,’ is contained with a U-shaped story (...) one in which man, as explained, loses the tree and water of life at the beginning of Genesis and gets them back at the end of Revelation.” Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 169.

⁵⁶ See C. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges: The Social Technology of Presencing* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2009), 19, and even Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer, *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013).

⁵⁷ Moltmann, *Man*, 117.

Aristotle maintained that “the future is obscure to us.”⁵⁸ However, the Christian story of the hope of resurrection emphasizes that by knowing that we are bound to Jesus, we can already be certain that someday even we will participate in the new reality of the resurrection, which has appeared in Christ. Therefore, the hope of resurrection from the dead takes up the destiny that characterizes each person’s human existence as openness beyond death. For Christians, this hope is not just a matter of some indefinite future. The path to this future has been opened by Jesus’ resurrection—by that reality of Jesus which encountered the disciples after the catastrophe of his crucifixion, although this new reality of Jesus, which appeared to the disciples at Easter, remains incomprehensible for us, as it was for them.⁵⁹

Change among human beings is, therefore, always related to how God continues to move this world in a U-shaped movement. Consequently, it is God’s *katabasis*, which breaks human *katabasis* (human disaster and descent) and makes human *anabasis* (human ascent, resurrection) possible. There is a reflexive relationship here, as human *anabasis* follows based on God’s *katabasis*. God’s *katabasis* into the world of humans is the heart of the story of the Incarnation. And in baptism, God’s *katabasis*, Christ’s descent into death and sin for our sake, is the heart of the matter: enabling the hope of resurrection (*anabasis*) for humans through Christ. Therefore, the Incarnation and baptism are *not just mere models* for the Christian life, but they are events through which the triune God is shaping—modeling—human change in Christ. The *telos* of human change rooted in baptism is therefore really eschatological, and not teleological in the Aristotelian meaning of the word, as it is directed to the final realization of the baptismal promise of eternal life in Christ through death.

⁵⁸ Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, J. A. K. Thompson, trans. (London: Penguin Books, 1953/1976/2004), 24.

⁵⁹ Pannenberg, *What Is Man*, 138.

Christian anthropology posits that human beings are born receivers, in every aspect of life, depending on the God who created them. The role of human beings is, therefore, to receive God's gifts with joy and gratitude, and share these gifts with their neighbor, throughout life. Through sin this relationship is corrupted, and human beings therefore struggle to be at the producing and not the receiving end of the relationship, both aiming at self-righteousness and despising a mutual solidarity of gifts with their neighbor and all creation. But the theological *telos* of anthropological change finds its ultimate response in the hope of resurrection. This hope is offered to humans through baptism. In baptism, human beings are remade, or reborn, receivers through God's U-shaped act of redemption in Christ. Leading change among human beings in ministry is about getting involved in the everyday troubles and joys of both young and old. The promise of the triune God in baptism gives a mandate, a commission, to enter into suffering, because in baptism the triune God has given the baptized the gift to nag God for the rest of their lives. This gift makes the leader leading change in ministry into a *co-servant*, someone who is there for the other, engaging in God's U-shaped resurrection story of hope and change.