The Cross in Christian Leadership: Cruciform Power and the Christian Leader

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ABSTRACT:

Essential to any organization is the practice and exercise of power. The distinct character of Christian leadership is shaped by the expression of power consistent with Christian principles. In these contexts, leaders feel an obligation to exhibit Christ-honoring qualities recognizing their faith commitments necessarily shape their practices.

In this paper, I will review Michael Gorman's exploration of Pauline spirituality – known as "cruciformity" – and bring his thought regarding the use and application of power into conversation with contemporary expressions of leadership. Specifically, I will show how Gorman's "cruciform power" provides a Christian resource whereby leaders may enhance their application of contemporary ideas and resources for healthy leadership. Cruciform power constitutes a specific set of Christian qualities on the use and expression of power that are recognizable and suitable for application by leaders in a church context.

Introduction

Several years ago, while attending class in graduate seminary, I was struck by words of

my professor, Charles Siburt, offered in response to a student's question. The student was

frustrated by his inability to bring about meaningful change in his church due to, what he

perceived, was the stubbornness of the elder board. Dr. Siburt answered, "If you have personal

power you don't need positional power. "The elders won't let me" is a cop-out. Personal power

means no one can stop you."[1] It was an important lesson for me at an early stage in my ministry

career. With a recent transition from the business world into congregational ministry, I was

familiar with the basic principles of leadership in a corporate climate and naively assumed those

principles would translate quickly and effectively to a congregational setting. I could not have

been more mistaken. Leaders in churches and in businesses function in different ways because

the constituent groups they lead are fundamentally different. Why does it seem to be the case that

the most prominent sources for Christian leaders come from outside Christian circles?[2]

"One of the recurring dilemmas of church leadership," states Christopher Beeley,

"concerns the relationship between spiritual, charismatic authority and the institutional authority

that leaders carry by virtue of their office."[3] The tension described here by Beeley represents the

challenge for Christian leaders as they perceive their own authority and influence in a church

context. Leaders feel an obligation to exhibit Christ-honoring qualities in the way they practice

leadership while recognizing a responsibility to encourage and nurture meaningful growth in the

lives of their parishioners. Sometimes this responsibility leads to the need for congregational

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[1] Charles Siburt, "Christian Leadership Development" (lecture, Abilene Christian University, Abilene, TX, June, 2010).

[2] Andrey V. Shirin, "Is Servant Leadership Inherently Christian?" *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics* vol. 3, no. 13 (Fall 2014):1-25. Shirin addresses the question of Christian influence in a business setting and the often interconnected nature of business success and Christian spirituality.

[3] Christopher A. Beeley, *Leading God's People: Wisdom from the Early Church for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman's, 2012), 43. Beeley goes on to make the case that the role of clergy is defined best by personal character and lifestyle, not status or position.

change. In these critical seasons in the life of the church, Christian leaders must choose how to proceed while navigating the spiritual, social, and political dynamics of the congregation. Yet, as Beeley notes, there are competing approaches to leadership inherent to the role. The form, or exercise, of influence employed by the minister will necessarily be shaped by the minister's theological and philosophical commitments.

In this paper, I will introduce a specific facet of Michael Gorman's exploration of Pauline spirituality known as "cruciform power."[4] I will then explore how key principles drawn from Gorman's thought, when brought into conversation with two prominent voices on leadership, provide an important resource for Christian leaders as they discern how to effectively engage with their congregation.

Cruciformity: A Spirituality of the Cross

Gorman defines Christian spirituality as "the experience of God's love and grace in daily life".[5] He believes the content for a Christian definition of spirituality is found in Paul's letters in the New Testament. Of keen interest is the language from Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:2 and Philippians 2:6-11.[6] Because Christ's death is paradigmatic to Christian faith, the cross then shapes Christian commitments and attitudes in all circumstances. This is to say the faith

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[4] Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 5. Gorman identifies four distinct facets of cruciformity which he explores in detail: Cruciform faith, love, power, and hope.

[5] Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 3. McGrath provides an alternative definition from an evangelical perspective. See Alistair McGrath, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction,* (Malden: Blackwell, 1999) 1-3. David B. Perrin, *Studying Christian Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 46. Central to Perrin's explanation of Christian Spirituality includes a "modeling of one's own life after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus under the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit." 46ff.

[6] "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ–that is, Jesus Christ crucified." Author's translation. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 1. Gorman's translation of 1Cor. 2:2 is paradigmatic to his argument because "Jesus Christ crucified" translated as such shifts the emphasis of the text from Christ in his totality, to a crucified Christ. The "hymn" of Philippians 2:6-11 is, for Gorman, Paul's "master story." Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 88.

commitments actualized in daily choices are informed by the obedient, self-emptying posture of Christ demonstrated at the cross.

Cruciformity is a Christian spirituality shaped by the crucified Christ. In other words, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the seminal event through which Christians properly understand the character of God and the event considered most essential to an authentic expression of Christian faith. The cross is the "interpretive lens through which God is seen" and is expressed in the distinctive Pauline values of faith, hope, and love.[7] The value of Gorman's thought for this discussion is found in the way he frames Paul's life, teaching, and ministry as a narration "in life and words, the story of God's self-revelation in Christ."[8]

Cruciform Power[9]

Cruciform power is the capacity, informed by the crucified Christ, to exercise influence over others. Unlike common cultural understandings of power defined by the use of force or positional status to exercise control and authority, cruciform power is understood in terms of humility and weakness. It is paradoxical in character because in weakness the true power of Christ is displayed fully in terms of vulnerability, suffering, and love.[10] Power understood in this way seeks to influence others through invitation and appeal leveraging the important bonds of meaningful relationship to shape behavior.

The paradoxical quality of cruciform power is reflected in Paul's ministry by his own experiences of suffering and the ongoing challenges of life and ministry defined by his

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[7] Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 7. Gorman draws these categories from 1 Corinthians 13 and adds a fourth category: cruciform power.

[8] Ibid.,

[9] Some content from this section was drawn from: Pickett, Benjamin D. (2016) "Through the Lens of the Cross: Cruciformity as a Model for Teaching Ministry," *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

[10] See I Corinthians 12.

commitment to an incarnational existence.[11] Paradigmatic to understanding power in this way is to recognize that, for Paul, "weakness makes Christ's power present" (2 Cor 12:8; 4:7-12) and "concrete physical pains suffered for the sake of the gospel."[12] Paul understood these events as evidence of his witness to the gospel. In other words, the demonstration of cruciform power accepts weakness and suffering as consistent with Christian character.[13]

Paul's stance on power shaped the way he interacted with the community of faith. He consistently appealed to his own weakness and commitment to Christ as an invitation for believers to listen to him and imitate him as an exemplar of faith (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1). When given the opportunity to exercise positional authority, he refrained (Rom 14, 15; 1 Cor 8), appealing to their understanding of Christian faith and love in their treatment of one another. Paul's refusal to control the community reflected his belief that the church, as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12), should be defined by the same qualities of self-giving love, humility, and vulnerability as Paul portrayed in his own life informed by the cross. Therefore, the exercise of power in the church must reflect these same qualities. Doing so does not negate the authority for leaders to act, but redefines the criteria that qualifies a person for leadership in the Christian community.[14] Put more succinctly, Paul embraced vulnerability, weakness, and humility as qualities consistent with Christ-like behavior.

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[11] Gorman identifies five different expressions of cruciform power in Paul's apostolic ministry:
a) his personal presence and lack of rhetorical skill, b) his constant suffering, c) his "thorn in the flesh" experience (1 Cor 12), d) his refusal for financial support and performance of manual labor, and e) his attitude of humility and meekness.

[12] Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 288.

[13] This is not to say that suffering in its various forms is a circumstance to be desired, but a condition where Christians are granted an opportunity to, like Paul, offer such circumstances asevidence of Christian conviction.

[14] See Hall for discussion on the nature and exercise of ecclesial power in the larger North American context. He argues convincingly that the church is in a post-Christendom era and suffers from the same understanding of power and control as those who have led the Christian church since the time of Augustine. Douglas Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

Gorman's explanation of "status transcendence and reversal," as another facet of cruciform power, gives special emphasis to "what is weak in the world" and "what is low and despised in the world" (1 Cor 1:26-29) as representative of the substance of the power of God.[15] Authentic power subverts cultural definitions of power based on the use of force through positional and social rank and replaces these tenets with cruciform postures of vulnerability, lowliness, and weakness. Power understood in this way "transcends" cultural conventions by courageously refusing to accept and exercise power through coercion.[16] Gorman is correct when he asks readers to define power as something that "transcends and reverses social status" because the "cross reveals the way God works, not just the way he achieved salvation."[17] The cross represents a form of power consistent with the character of God.

This reversal is important to our conversation regarding Christian leadership because power understood in this way shifts the ordinary dynamics of power (through use of force or coercion) from one posture that seeks to impose one's desired outcome to another that chooses to lead by invitation and influence based on relationship and Christ-like example. Cruciform power is the ongoing exhibition of the same self-emptying, status-renouncing postures consistent with those demonstrated by Christ at the cross. Therefore, leaders who seek other forms of power and control outside this dynamic misunderstand what it means to be cruciform and misunderstand the nature and use of power in the church context. In other words, status transcendence and reversal resists the exercise of positional authority to influence church behavior.

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[15] Power as status transcendence and reversal, moral transformation, boasting and victory in suffering, and cruciform care for others are four categories Gorman uses to explain Christ's "downwardly mobile" action at the cross. Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 298-303.

[16] The ability of church leaders to competently use their spiritual gifts and abilities in service to the church is not diminished by the demands of cruciform power. To the contrary, the trust granted to leadership by the church is enhanced when leaders exercise their authority through invitation and other cruciform postures.

[17] Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 300.

Cruciform power means Christians (and leaders in particular) possess humility, love, and vulnerability informed by the crucified Christ as they interact with others in the church. For Christian leaders, they will be people who exemplify this quality in the way they make requests of others, of the way they encourage and offer guidance to others, and in the way they exercise leadership on critical matters.

Implicit to these dynamics of cruciform power is the important recognition that the believing community sees in Paul's behavior the same qualities of the crucified Christ preached to them. Paul expects this connection – reinforced by his Christ-honoring posture – to inspire his churches to recognize his authority as an apostle and exemplar of faith. In other words, Paul's appeal necessarily points to their knowledge of the faith, the emotions surrounding their conversion to Christ, and the new and fulfilling life that now marks their existence as motivators to honor his instructions.[18] His behaviors – his exercise of power – are not an abdication of his role as a leader. They are demonstrative of cruciform leadership.[19]

<u>Cruciform Power and Leadership</u>

For the remainder of this paper, I will introduce two prominent views on leadership and explore each perspective for elements of cruciform power. The intent of this exercise is to discover how these prominent resources on leadership, and their adopted approaches to the exercise of power, align with elements of cruciform power as we've discussed. My hope is to use

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[18] Carson Reed, "Motive and Movement: Affective Leadership through the Work of Preaching," *Journal of Religious Leadership,* vol. 13, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 63-84. Reed explores the importance of emotional appeal for congregational leaders.

[19] Truls Akurland, "To Live Lives Worthy of God": Leadership and Spiritual Formation in I Thessalonians 2:1-12," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, vol. 9, no. 1 (2016): 18-34. Akurland makes a convincing case that Paul, and his co-workers in faith, are leaders in the Christian community because they modeled a Christ-like existence.

cruciform power as a qualifying lens to assist Christian leaders as they discern these resources

for their usefulness in a Christian context.

"The fact remains that teams," says Patrick Lencioni, "because they are made up of

imperfect human beings, are inherently dysfunctional."[20] This statement is the underlying

premise of his thought and the primary problem he seeks to solve for leaders. Lencioni believes

that organizations can accomplish great things if leaders are able to address the inherent

difficulties of team leadership. He claims organizations fail to "achieve teamwork because they

unknowingly fall prey to five natural but dangerous pitfalls…"[21] Lencioni presents a model to

resolve this leadership dilemma based on a foundation of trust.

It is at this point we find Lencioni aligning with elements of cruciform power. For a

leader to build trust in a team, Lencioni says the leader must first embrace trustworthy character.

The first task of the leader, in order to build trust, is to "demonstrate vulnerability first. This

requires that the leader risk losing face in front of the team, so that subordinates will take the risk

themselves."[22] He goes on to say that the leader is responsible to safeguard the vulnerability of

others so that they are not "punished" for their openness and sincerity. In other words, Lencioni's

model presupposes the need for relational integrity grounded on something other than positional

power. It seeks to build connections based on genuine relationship to foster teamwork. Such an

approach mirrors a cruciform posture by transcending customary approaches to leadership based

on status and position.

This relational quality expresses itself again when the team encounters conflict. Lencioni

believes the greatest challenge for leaders is to resist the urge to control a conflict situation and

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[20] Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2002), vii.
[21] Lencioni, *Five Dysfunctions*, 187. The five dysfunctions are: a) absence of trust, b) fear of conflict, c) lack of commitment, d) avoidance of accountability, and e) inattention to results.
[22] Lencioni, *Five Dysfunctions*, 201.

instead "allow resolution to occur naturally."[23] In other words, leaders take on a cruciform posture by modeling good behavior in conflict situations. They are not avoiders, nor do they seek to overprotect their teams from inevitable disagreement.

In his book on organizational change, John Kotter presents an eight-stage process model to initiate and implement meaningful change in an organization.[24] Kotter begins by identifying eight errors managers and leaders often make when companies recognize – because of outside forces or shifts in leadership – new initiatives are necessary to bring about success. Key to the strength of his ideas, the author contends, is both the sequence of the model and the organizational will to bring about the necessary changes.

Kotter's view of the role of leaders is evidenced by the way he defines his principles for management and leadership. In an exchange on the differences between the two concepts, Kotter states that "leadership is a set of processes that creates organizations in the first place or adapts them to significantly changing circumstances."[25] That the author begins here, at a theoretical level, rather than with people and their own peculiarities for leadership, is significant because such an approach suggests leadership is primarily an acquired skill.

This approach to leadership is reinforced by the author's description of the necessary elements of a "guiding coalition" to implement new ideas and trajectories for the organization.[26] Kotter describes four "characteristics" of members who make up this decision-making group.

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[23] Lencioni, *Five Dysfunctions*, 206.
[24] John Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Press, 1996), 20.
[25] Kotter, *Leading Change*, 25. The author seems to hold a low view of management and managers.
[26] Kotter, *Leading Change*, 57.

For the author, the first characteristic is "Position power" defined by the presence of people on the coalition who possess adequate positional power to overcome resistance to the process.[27]

As we bring Kotter into conversation with cruciform power, elements such as vulnerability and humility, or status-transcendence are incongruent with his view of effective leadership. The priority is the effective use of positional power to manage a process for organizational change. The focus is strategic and results-oriented.

Kotter believes that trust is an important facet of building an effective guiding coalition.[28] However, the methodology employed to engender trust lacks any critical consideration of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. The suggested approach assumes trust is a natural consequence fostered by an off-site retreat interaction where "honest discussion about how individuals think and feel with regard to the organization, its problems and opportunities."[29] In other words, there is an assumption that trust will emerge organically by spending more time together and encouraging honest dialogue.

Conclusions

Cruciform power, modeled by Paul, constitutes a set of principles essential for effective leadership in a church context. The practice of cruciform power stands in striking contrast to conventional methods for leadership in a corporate setting. Cruciform power necessarily resists the use of force or coercion to bring about desired outcomes and its usefulness for leaders is discovered through the voluntary participation of church members in response to postures of weakness, vulnerability, and love as demonstrated by Christ at the cross. There is considerable

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[27] Ibid., The author does not ignore the significance of long-standing organizational members to influence the process through their charismatic qualities. He asserts they can be positive influences if they choose to cooperate with the new direction.

[28] Kotter, *Leading Change*, 62.

[29] Ibid., 63.

risk involved because, for the Christian leader, the adoption of these principles may not be recognized for their value and sincerity even in a Christian context.

Cruciform power is identified by a resistance to alternative methods of power where force, coercion, or authority are exercised through position or status. This posture is sacrificial in nature possessing a willingness to endure suffering for the sake of others. There is an intrinsic recognition that a cruciform existence constitutes a model of leadership where appeals are honored based on the leader's character. In other words, it is cruciform character that inspires and motivates change in a Christian context.

In the contemporary models of leadership addressed, I believe Lencioni helps the Christian leader more effectively because of the relationship he promotes between the leader and the constituent groups under the direction of the leader. Just as Paul sought to influence churches based on his character, Lencioni invites the same kind of observation when he insists leaders must model the same characteristics for team building expected of the team. In other words, courageous leadership involves a move to become less and embrace perceived postures of weakness and vulnerability to both invite participation and develop trust among team members.

It is here that we find the key challenge in Kotter's model. Leaders cannot have it both ways. They cannot insist that trust is an important element in the leadership dynamic and insist the leadership team necessarily possess the positional power to bring about effective change. The existence of positional power in a business (and sometimes church) context is assumed. For leaders to overcome this dynamic and seek out authentic interest and expression of vulnerability from their subordinates in order to engender trust there must be, at some level, a demonstration, or willingness, for leaders to genuinely identify with those they lead. Lencioni recognizes this distinction. Kotter seeks to work around it.

For Christian leaders, the challenge for use of either resource employed in this project begins with the distinctive differences evident in a church and business context. In businesses, there are contractual obligations mandating employees perform tasks in exchange for a wage. People are paid to perform their assigned responsibilities. In a church context, all participants (save ministry staff) are volunteers. The incentives and obligations found in a business context do not apply. Leaders that recognize this distinction will be blessed if they embrace a model consistent with their context. For Christian leaders, an approach to leadership that is cruciform frees the leader from the need to feel in-charge, or to dominate the other, and encourages the same posture of love, openness, and influence found in Christ himself.