

“What Kind of Leadership?”
1 Thessalonians 2:1–8
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Almost thirty years ago, long before she wrote the Smyth and Helwys commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Linda McKinnish Bridges preached my installation sermon at Ginter Park Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia. She preached on the image of pastor as a nursing mother and based the sermon on the verses we have read today from 1 Thessalonians 2. The NRSV translates v. 7b as, “But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children,” but the sense of the passage is of a mother nursing her children.

I will never forget the insight this sermon gave into leadership in general and pastoral ministry specifically, but I will also never forget the reaction of one older minister in the room. When he first heard Linda say the words “nursing mother,” he twitched, and when I say “twitched,” I mean not just his eyes but his whole body. And every time she said the words, he twitched again. Knowing him as I did, it was not a surprise.

Yet, the truth is most of us in this culture probably ought to twitch when we read this passage, not because of its reference to a normal part of life, but because of what it says about leadership. Whether we are talking about leadership in the church or anywhere else, this is a very different image than what we find most often in our culture.

Leadership has been an in-vogue topic for some time. More books and articles have been written on this subject than we can count. In the church, it is often used as a smokescreen for other issues. Someone who does not like the theology or personality of a pastor but realizes that direct criticism may not get them anywhere, can simply say, “I’m not sure we have the right kind of leadership.”

And yet, while leadership can be used as a smokescreen, and far too much has been written about it, it is still critical to accomplishment in almost every arena of life — sports, business, academics, politics and the church. Talent and hard work alone will not win a championship,

make for success, develop an elite program, enhance public life or strengthen the community of faith. Leadership is required.

But does it matter what kind of leadership we are talking about? Some would say — no — as long as we get where we need to go. The Apostle Paul would say — yes — especially in the church, it matters very much, and perhaps it matters elsewhere too.

If we are to take the verses we have read from 1 Thessalonians 2 seriously, the first thing we should note is that, in the realm of Christian leadership, motivation is important. Paul says that his appeal does not come from deceit, impure motives or trickery. He does not come to the people with words of flattery or a pretext for greed. He is not seeking the praise of other people. Rather, he comes to share the gospel with great courage no matter how much opposition he faces. He speaks not to please mortals, he says, but to please God who tests our hearts.

We don't know whether Paul is responding to criticism or just making his case. He faces criticism throughout his ministry — from Roman authorities, Jewish leaders and other Christian leaders. But we don't know for sure in this case. We just know what he says does and does not motivate his ministry, and clearly in his mind, motivation is important. Someone who is dishonest about the basic assertions of faith, is in ministry for financial gain, or is seeking praise and affirmation cannot effectively proclaim and embody the gospel.

So, our motivation for leadership is important, perhaps in all arenas of life. We speak cynically about politicians being in the business for ego and power needs, and this is true for some, if not many. But there are people in public life who are there because of a genuine calling to serve or at least we hope and pray there are. Some people aspire to leadership positions at school or in business because they want to obtain some other goal — a scholarship to a university, a better job, more prestige. But there are leaders who simply have a gift and want to use it to make a difference. Motivation is important just about everywhere.

But it is really important in the church because of the nature of our mission and the character of the One we follow. We might wonder whether anyone would seek out leadership in the church — either as a

minister or a lay leader — for any reason other than good and noble ones. And I wish that this were not a real question, but not only do we all have mixed motives, I have known a good number of church people who seemed to be motivated primarily by inappropriate things.

I have known people who have gone into ministry because they needed affirmation. The church is and should be a caring place, and ministers are human beings who need support, but the purpose of ministry is not to have your own ego strengthened. I have also known ministers who were driven by financial concerns. To be clear, other than televangelism, ministry is not a profession through which to get rich, but I have known ministers who visited more often the elderly people who gave them extra money, as well as ministers who made it their business to know who gave the church more money and then catered to those people. And I have known lay leaders who had major issues with power and control which motivated and shaped their “service” to the church.

Motivation is important in the church, and we are called not only to avoid self-interest and greed but to declare the gospel in a way that pleases God, whether it pleases other people or not. So, our motivation needs to square with heart of the gospel which is about service and love, sacrifice and self-giving. In a message delivered to Ebenezer Baptist Church shortly before his death, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said this.

If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize; that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards; that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school. I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to love somebody (as quoted in *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*, William Willimon, p. 53).”

Some question whether Dr. King revealed genuine humility in this message. He did mention some of his accomplishments.

But he also laid down his life for those he served and for the Christ he followed. I take his humility and clarity about motivation as genuine. For followers of Jesus, it is all about love.

Yet, if we are to take the verses from 1 Thessalonians 2 seriously, another thing we should note is that while motivation is important in the realm of Christian leadership, so is a willingness to share ourselves with those among whom we serve. Paul says he is determined to share not only the gospel with the people but also himself because the people have become so dear to him.

The most effective ministry is never just about exchanges of information about God and Jesus. It inevitably involves relationships, human connections, the giving of ourselves in a personal way. The gospel begins with God taking on human flesh, choosing to dwell among us, and thus all faithful ministry is incarnational. It is personal and self-giving.

In fact, earlier in this passage, Paul notes that he has just been with the Philippians, among some of his favorite people, and he has suffered much in that city. He has been imprisoned. Yet he is willing to face whatever opposition arises in the process of sharing the gospel and himself. Leadership in the church requires more than specific knowledge and a skill set. It requires that we make ourselves vulnerable and get close to people, that we share ourselves as well as their suffering and joy.

I think of the nineteenth-century Belgian priest known as Father Damien who served among lepers in Molokai. He shared not only the gospel with these isolated people, extending grace and compassion; he shared himself. He got close to them and made himself vulnerable. In fact, he even longed to experience what his congregation experienced and one day let them know he got what he wished for, as he began a sermon with the words, “*We lepers...*” Father Damien had contracted Hansen’s Disease, leprosy.

I don’t think we need to contract COVID-19. Once we have the virus, we are a threat to everyone around us. Limiting the spread in every way we can is an act of compassion. But I do think

we have to be willing to make ourselves vulnerable in some way, to invest ourselves in the lives and wellbeing of others.

I have known ministers who kept a distance from people, relating to them with great energy in a specific teaching or pastoral care moment, but not acknowledging their existence in other encounters. I know of a minister who never ate any meal with his church. Keeping such a distance may express some kind of elite leadership status, but it negates the value of authentic ministry.

And to be clear, I am not talking about personality types — whether a person is introverted or extroverted, shy or outgoing, better with groups or individuals. I am talking about a yearning to connect with others and a willingness to be vulnerable. This quality benefits leaders in any context, but in the church, where the one we follow came to dwell among us and then gave his life for us, leadership requires us to share not just the gospel but ourselves.

So, Paul's writing tells us that motivation is important in Christian leadership, as is a willingness to share ourselves. And then, it tells us what leadership is about at its core — it's about nurture and care, like a mother nursing her child. It is a different image than what we find most often in our culture, and it may not seem like the Paul we know who sometimes expresses a low view of women, but the statements about women attributed to Paul by scripture vary dramatically. And even before we get to gender, the fact that Paul uses a family metaphor of any kind is unusual.

As Linda McKinnish Bridges notes in her commentary, the more common arenas of life from which to develop a metaphor for leadership would have been the worlds of politics, the military, and patronage. But repeatedly in 1 Thessalonians, Paul looks to the family — saying that he cared gently for the people like a nursing mother, later saying he is like a father teaching them (2:11-12), and finally saying he feels like an orphaned child being separated from them (2:17). The intimate connections of family, not the formal structures of political and economic life, characterize the church, and thus leadership in the church should reflect these connections.

But the image of a nursing mother seems most distinctive, especially for Paul, and it has endured, despite centuries of patriarchal resistance, to this day. Eleventh-century Benedictine monk and Archbishop of Canterbury St. Anselm latched on to this image of Paul as the nurse of the faithful, the sweet mother who bears children and instructs them with the teachings of Christ (*The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm*, p. 152). More recently, New Testament Scholar Walter Wink has said this about feminine images in scripture. “I find myself wishing that Christian theology had moved more in this direction and less in that of an all-male Trinity, a dark and abusive blood atonement theory, and an at times doctrinal and moral rigidity (*The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of Man*, p. 61).”

In this time when volume and force are often mistaken for strength, it seems critical that we hold on these feminine images. One does not have to be a bully to lead. In fact, a little humility goes a long way, and gentle encouragement and instruction lead to more enduring change than threats and demands. As Dana’s mother used to say, we attract more flies with honey than vinegar.

Leadership can require toughness. Paul stands up to opposition. But humility and gentleness are more important, perhaps everywhere, but certainly in the church, because our calling is to care for people, to increase the love of God and neighbor, to seek what is best for others and help them grow. Only with a certain kind of leadership can we pursue this calling.

When there was a competition for status among his disciples, Jesus said this. “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:25-28).”

These are our models of leadership — a nursing mother, a suffering servant, a gentle nurturer who cultivates love.