

The Language of Leadership: Four Theses

1. Thesis One

Five non-negotiable phrases for a collaborative leadership

At the risk of crass oversimplification I want to propose that the language of leadership can be summed up in the following:

Thank you

Well done

Sorry

Please

What do you think?

These 5 phrases have emerged out of my own experience over a number of decades. They appear so common sense and eminently reasonable. Who could argue? I also want to suggest that such language, in so far as it is an implicit account of who we are as human beings, offers some simple clues about what it means for each of us to be a leader in whatever vocation, ministry or calling we are associated with. I also have at the back of my mind the chilling words of the letter of James (3:4-10):

‘Look at ships; though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters this ought not to be so.’

And from a very different place the German Philosopher, Martin Heidegger, ‘Language is the house of being. In its house we are at home’. And we might wish to add, ‘and from this home our being shines forth in language’. Words do matter; our language, its tone and intent does

matter. Who we are, our being as such, is transparent through our language.

So to this language:

‘Thank you’ – it rolls off the tongue so easily. And how much appreciated a ‘thank you’ is. To live in a world without thanks is a barren existence. In a robot like environment thanks are unnecessary which is one reason why ‘thank you’ is an endangered species among leaders today. Our context is highly rationalized, consumer orientated production of goods and services including the goods and services of religion. The churches are infected with this western strain of individual consumerism. It’s not an environment for the cultivation of genuine thanks; more often it might be a perfunctory thanks even as the person is looking towards the next task on the list. A life of thankfulness and its close relatives, gratitude and praise is fundamental to healthy life as a follower of Jesus. The truth is if we were never thanked as a child we find it hard to offer thanks to others. We have learnt from early days that whatever else life might consist of it does not consist of thanks and praise. Where ‘thank you’ is familiar language lives are built up, creative capacities are released.

‘Well done’ - In response to this phrase I remember a mature age ministry candidate once telling a group of students that he had grown up in a home where he never received a ‘well done’. This only spurred him on the try harder and harder to get a ‘well done’. He succeeded in everything but yet nothing came back. He became a successful businessman, made a lot of money, secretly craving a ‘well done’ but to no avail. The workplace was an industrious but somber environment. ‘Well done’ had no place. Conversion for this person meant giving up trying to earn a ‘well done’. He discovered he was loved unconditionally by God. He was free to bless others with a ‘well done’ before others tried to grind it out of him. ‘Well done’ lifts the spirit; ‘I am not invisible after all’, ‘my contribution is valued’. Of course there is no cheap ‘Well done’.

‘Sorry’ – How do you fair with this one? For many these five letters are the hardest of all to string together. How much conflict could be resolved with a ‘sorry’? It was the defining mark – and the first mark – of a former Prime Minister. Sorry is at the heart of evangelical repentance. We confess our sin and hear the words of forgiveness. What makes ‘sorry’ so hard for us? I grew up as the eldest of 3 sons. If I got into trouble I would blurt out a ‘sorry’ immediately as a way of lessening or avoiding punishment which was usually a crack around the backside from my father. I was so expert at

sorry that it was often out of my mouth before I was fully aware of what I had done. Sorry was my insurance policy; but I wasn't usually sorry at all! So later in life in the most intimate of relationships I became very resistant to the 'sorry' word. It triggered too many memories of an earlier cheap sorry and a poor attempt to avoid conflict. I had to learn to say 'sorry' and mean it. A respected leader is not the perfect leader simply a humble person who is in touch with his/her limitations and finitude and because of this is not trapped in the pride of life which admits no fault or failure. The American ethicist Stanley Hauerwas writes about 'learning to be a sinner' and I think the language of sorry is part of that process. Of course the dynamics here are complex and in an environment where a 1000 sorries is never met with one word of forgiveness is a cruel world to live in.

So 'Thank you, well done, sorry'. I thought to myself that that was it. The three magic phrases for the language of leadership. My wife pointed to a problem. Are not people still in danger of being treated as objects to fulfill your wishes and challenges? This is the language that might simply end up being a tool to motivate and extract something out of others for other purposes. What about the language of 'please'? Here the leader is at the mercy of another; control is being relinquished. One waits for a response. We are reminded of our connectedness to others; that our life is not our own; that for better or worse our lives are very much in the hands of others. A former premier of an Australian state was speaking at a public event; he was a devout Christian. He was asked what he would say when he got to heaven. He referred immediately to the thief on the cross who said 'Jesus remember when you come into your kingdom'. This was the great 'please' and it was a profound recognition that our life is not our own. 'Please' clearly not an optional extra like perhaps air conditioning once was. So by now I was confident that I had nailed it: 'Thank you, well done, sorry, please'. I was basking in my own self-congratulation as I informed my eldest daughter (late 20s) of this new wisdom. She had a devastating reply, 'Dad it's all about you; you have never asked me 'what do I think'.

How quickly our best efforts curve inwards. Narcissism and leadership are like blood relatives. It was Martin Luther who described the fundamental condition of human beings as being 'twisted into self'. This is the 'sin that clings so closely' (Hebrews 12:1). It is a fundamental

affliction for those who lead; the inertia of self-attraction.¹ On this account, seeking God involves being untwisted through attraction to God. Redemption has to do with being untwisted. What does this look like for the language of leadership? Our language needs to be untwisted; opened to others; involving them, seeking their participation rather than blind obedience.

My daughter's comment stung me. I had to add a fifth element to the language of leadership: 'What do you think'? And to ask this genuinely expecting that there is wisdom here; that listening to another is a simple acknowledgement that we are all made in the image of God, all are deeply valued indeed cherished by the good God; that I am not the centre of the universe. 'What do you think' is an invitation to collaborate on the premise that the wisdom available far exceeds my own capacities. Leaders today are the creatures of professionalism and the rise of the expert. Church leadership is no better and perhaps at times worse, especially when leadership operates under the divine blessing. 'What do you think?' has little place in such a context.

But such language is at the heart of a truly collaborative leadership. Today there is a veritable avalanche of books and articles on leadership within Christianity, let alone in other areas of business, politics and military life. Across the disciplines the language of collaboration is regularly invoked. The churches ought to be at the forefront of this kind of leadership with an emphasis on participative knowledge and action. The phrase, 'what do you think', ought to be stock in trade; of course not the only phrase but an indicator of an approach, what is valued etc.

I would suggest that when it comes to leadership in and by the church there are a number of different possibilities. A question arises for us: Has the church's leadership a Christian future – I mean among the many other possibilities that confront it? I would go so far as to say that for Christianity if it is not a collaborative leadership it is unlikely to be Christian. I say this is because I have come to the conclusion that collaborative leadership is embedded in the nature of the Christian gospel. Collaborative leadership ought to be located within a theology of Christian baptism. To be a true collaborator is a journey into humility; to the ground; to become humus. And this is relevant not just to individuals but to churches and their ethos. This path into humility seems to be an exceedingly painful and often a tortuous process. Many people of the church and beyond have been victims of a ministerial leadership that has been the very antithesis of a collaborative venture. Unreconstructed Christian

¹ Daniel Hardy, *Wording a Radiance: Parting Conversations on God and the Church*, London: SCM, 2010, 47.

leaders often exercising extremely successful ministries can remain blind to the collaborative way. The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Church at Rome (chap. 12:5) says that ‘we are members one of another’. Our lives are orientated towards one another not away. This deep attraction has its basis in God’s desire for fellowship with creation and human beings in particular. Collaboration and cooperation are part of our God given make-up. The philosopher Raimo Tuomela, states: ‘Cooperation seems to be innate, a coevolutionary adaptation based on group selection, the basic reason for this being that human beings have evolved in a group context’.² He also notes the fact that people seem disposed to ‘defect, act competitively, or even act aggressively’. I digress a little. ‘What do you think?’ opens a new world for the Christian leader.

2. Thesis Two

Renewing the language of leadership involves multiple deaths and resurrections

A couple of things are relevant here.

First, I have discovered over the years that these five stock phrases through which our being shines through are quite specific to particular cultures and backgrounds. For example, some cultures don’t have a word for ‘thank you’ or ‘sorry’. Other words and/or actions might be deployed to perform the work done by the phrases I have been discussing. Guilt based cultures are very different from shame based cultures and this impacts on the form and substance of leadership and its language. So the matter of the language of leadership is not simple.

Second, whenever I have proposed the above phrases that ought to fall from the lips of the leader, I have always found that given a bit of thought people will begin almost automatically filling in the blanks. What is not covered; what ought to be there. Is there a possible and probably list of such phrases? I confess that regarding lists, there will be no end. So what I offer is a taster regarding the language of leadership. I remember one brash know it all student in recent years who said, what about, ‘This is the what we will do’. It had the ring of confident authority about it and there are times when the leader will have to take charge in a sense. But my concern was that this language was this student’s default language rather than a considered response to a situation. In this respect I have recently

² Tuomela, *The Philosophy of Sociality: The Shared Point of View*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 150.

begin a new book, *The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in the Modern Age*.³ It is an important and interesting book and is justly critical of those leaders whose motto seems to be in effect, “They did it my way”. He ends the book with the following telling comment: ‘Leaders who believe they have a personal right to dominate decision-making in many different areas of policy, and who attempt to exercise such a prerogative, do a disservice both to good governance and to democracy. They deserve not followers, but critics’ (362).

Third the language of leadership is deeply influenced by not only our past but also the environment in which we live and work. Some years ago I was intrigued with a book entitled, *The Brain that Changes Itself*.⁴ It examined the way the brain actually recalibrated itself in response to its environment. Our brains have a degree of plasticity about them. It means for example if a leader surrounds him or herself with people of like mind and views and systematically screens out counter views and opinions after a while – a remarkably short while - the brain functions are altered; the leader comes to believe in the unquestioning rightness of their own views. Their closest aids experience the same phenomenon. It explains quite a lot of behavior. About the time I was reading this book I was preaching a series of sermons on leadership in the Books of Samuel – the history of Israel and its leaders from the dark side; the underbelly, not from the point of view of the Chronicler. I spoke about the plastic brain and asked the congregation how long they thought it would take for the brain to re-wire itself and generate a ‘might is right’ attitude. One former military leader in the congregation yelled out ‘not as long as you think’. Our language of leadership is shaped by the environment in which we live and work.

Fourth, my real concern is how we deal with the phrases I have proposed. What phrases are you at home with; that are unproblematic for you as a leader? What phrases are harder to squeeze from your mouth than to extract blood from a stone? Why is that the case? The ‘untwisted self’ expresses itself in a free flowing language of thanks and praise. This is the logic of overflow from the abundance of a heart grounded in the goodness of God. However such an overflow is never cheap. It will cost us. It requires baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Recovering the language of leadership is first of all a movement down into the earth, metaphorically speaking; a breaking open of the self; a kind of

³ Archie Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader*, London: Vintage Books, 2015.

⁴ Norman Doidge, *The Brain that Changes Itself*, London: Penguin Books, 2008.

evangelical repentance. Jesus's words echo in my ears at this point: 'Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (John 12:24). For the language of leadership to bear fruit the speaker is required to undergo multiple deaths. The baptism of language is part of the baptism of the Spirit and it is a constant companion for leaders. The first hundred years are the hardest. So how are you travelling with your language of leadership? What self-knowledge do we have regarding our language? What needs to change? What needs to be reformed? What new language needs to be raised up within us; in the churches and ministries in which we live and move and have our being?

3. Thesis Three

The language of leadership can be traced to the theological doctrine of the 'Imago Dei'

The language of leadership that I have proposed this morning seems at a number of levels entirely what one would expect of a rational common sense approach to leadership. A pragmatist might say that if it helps to get the job done and we manage to achieve our goals then this is the language to practice; to become fluent in. In other words the ends justify the means and in this case the means seem quite positive and wise. And to give this approach its best grounding we might go on to say that such language is part of a common sense way of leading people.

But if we dig a little deeper we soon tap into the underlying virtues tradition that has undergone a revival in recent times but comes from ancient days. This is the tradition of critical reflection on the shape and form of the good life. This tradition is embedded in current discussions about values and ethics. Such discussions filter into the discourse of leadership and are appropriated by all manner of institutional and organizational entities including churches. I have recently examined a doctoral thesis on leadership in the church that draws heavily on contemporary theories of leadership. Most of the theories discussed are indebted in one way or another, to a greater or lesser extent, to a conception of human beings as rational, well meaning and full of that elusive characteristic, common sense extolling virtuous intent. It is an attractive though essentially Pelagian anthropology – the belief that human beings have the innate capacity to craft their own achievement. It is often more than a little puzzled if not impotent to deal with dysfunctional and dangerous leaders. Why are people like that? What

professional development course do they need to attend? Such an approach doesn't make any sense when you are dealing with serious character defects that manifest in embedded narcissistic and sociopathic behavior; the defining feature of which is violence and hurt to other people. You always know you are working for such a leader when 90% of your emotional energy and thinking time is consumed by their behavior. This is not to suggest that such leaders are unable to exhibit the virtues though it does mean that usually at some stage their virtuous acts will become disfigured and turn into something else; usually cruel or totally lacking in capacity for compassion and empathy. The best book I have ever read on this common reality among leaders is aptly titled, *Snakes In Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work*.⁵ In my own Christian tradition I just changed the title to 'Snakes in Albs: When Psychopaths lead the Church'.

The virtues tradition that underlies much of contemporary approaches to leadership often lacks the one thing needful i.e. the capacity and capability to enact what is espoused. The language of leadership may be both aspirational and actively cultivated within an organization or institution. Such language may embody the values of respect and recognition so essential to a healthy institutional ethos. When and where such language is the stock in trade, so to speak, we ought to welcome it and be thankful. And when this occurs we ought to welcome it and rejoice for it is a sign that the common grace of the providential care of the Spirit God in the world is alive and active.

But this does provoke the question: Why should human beings behave in such a way? Is it because we cannot act otherwise; because we are rational, reasonable caring creatures? That human beings are naturally virtuous and will act and speak in virtuous ways? At this point I want to suggest that the deepest foundation for the language of leadership that I am proposing today is to be found in the concept of human beings made in the image of God. I want to draw some links between our language as leaders, the background tradition of the virtues with its long lineage and a theological anthropology grounded in the Imago Dei. Why push the argument in this direction? There are a number of reasons. First I think we are obliged to find some deeper roots for our actions including our language precisely because what we do and say is so significant for our life together. Second we need an account of our life that can name our failures and celebrate our remarkable capacities. At this point the virtues

⁵ Paul Babiak, *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work*, HarperBusiness, 2006.

tradition cries out for some theoretical justifications. The Christian tradition, draws upon the Jewish tradition of the *imago dei* and interprets this anthropology through the lens of Christ the new image of the invisible God. In this rich theological vein can be found a long tradition of the glory and tragedy of human life; the source for renewal, the dynamics of transformation and the possibilities for new community.

What has this got to do with our language as leaders. Much in every way. First, if Heidegger is correct (and I think he is on this score); that language is the house of our being – after all we are inheritors of a scripture tradition that refers to the logos of God – God in Christ is the incarnation of God who is language i.e. God's being and God's word are ontologically one (light from light, True God from true God, begotten not made). Second, that our being is a gift from a gracious God. Therefore third our language is not simply consequential, of small moment, but rather an embodiment of who we are before one another and before God in whose image we are made. What capacitates our language is nothing less than the very Spirit of God. This may seem ludicrous and offensive when we consider some of the rubbish and lies that echo from the tongue. However a theological account of the language of leadership and our capacity for renewal and transformation dares not leave us at first base with common sense wisdom – that's not a home run; nor ought it leave us at second base drawing upon the strength of our values and aspirations – they will wilt under pressure; nor ought we be left stranded on third base calling upon our well cultivated inner virtues for even here we are still drawing on our own resources which can hardly sustain let alone drive us onwards. Our capability and capacity for a language worthy of a leader who is a follower of Jesus Christ will spring from God's active working in the world and human life.

4. Thesis Four

The language of leadership is transformed in the context of Christian worship

I offer a brief comment on this last point. In worship God calls; we respond. This is the fundamental and continually repeating dynamic through endless variations as there are ways to worship the living God. God calls to us; God comes seeking us in the garden of our fears and folly. We are called out of such places into the light and so respond to the divine attraction. We respond in many modes: praise, confession, thanks, intercession. As our language in the presence of the Holy God so is our

language in the presence of God's children made in God's image. We are people of thanks; people who are sorrowful for wrongs; we are people who have heard a great affirmation of the world – the Lord has done well and so may we offer that; we have made our requests known and so 'please' is never far from our lips; and we are sent to serve our brothers and sisters 'what do they think?, what do they need?. What we are schooled in and formed by in worship can become the continually renewing source for our lives as leaders. We are sent out from worship of Christ the Lord untwisted; a self orientated to others and the world for which Christ died and rose; with fresh capacity for gratitude and truthfulness; with a new language that befits a follower of Christ.

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