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# The Image of God in Leadership: A Contextual Exploration in Theology of Leadership

Gregg A. Okesson

Our world is full of leaders, yet we are rarely satisfied with them. We speak about leadership, write books and articles, and sponsor conferences and workshops on the topic. If we could measure success purely on the basis of the wealth of material on a given subject, then leadership would be humanity's crown achievement. Yet, sadly, such is not the case. Within the past two weeks, merely in Africa, a new President, Paul Kagame, has been elected into office in Rwanda with a 95% majority; Charles Taylor, the President of Liberia was forced into exile by his people; and the former Ugandan dictator, Idi Amin, died while also in exile. In few continents, as in Africa, have leaders offered greater hope, while simultaneously providing greater collective disappointment. The world hangs its highest hopes on the shoulder of its giant leaders, and reserves its bitterest resentment for the same.

If one clear voice, unaffected by the well meaning hagiography of writers, could emerge from the pages of history, she would tell us that humans are mildly obsessed with leaders and are willing to overlook many faults and abuses if we may momentarily gain a hero, a deliverer, or even an idol.

What is the cause of our obsession? As humans, we are intrinsically followers, to the core of our being. As such, in figurative terms, we are all like money strewn across the landscape, with many leaders seeking to 'cash in' on the wealth. The problem

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is not that we are followers (although it is related to what kind of followers we are, or to whom); rather, it lies in how leaders view their

followers, and ultimately, even themselves. Therefore, the fundamental issue in leadership revolves around identity.

My intention in writing this article is to take the first step toward developing a contextualized theology of leadership. While the author acknowledges and is indebted to the cacophony of voices on Christian leadership, these voices often do not go deep enough into the human condition and the character and intentions of our God-leader. Furthermore, as such, they often give rise to a bewildered response by the honest reader, resulting in questions such as, 'Even if I can believe in servant leadership, how is it really possible within Africa?' Our theology must be livable, or it is irrelevant. It must be applied to the core identity of a culture, or it should be discarded.

Therefore, I would like to suggest that the first place to begin in developing a theology of leadership is with the Image of God. This article seeks to briefly establish the need for a theology of leadership within the African context so as to develop some fundamental characteristics in a theology of leadership, which can be livable back into that context.<sup>1</sup> My thesis is simply to prove that the Image of God is both the intrinsic locus of leadership as well as the goal toward which true, godly leadership must be directed. Therefore, for the purposes of this article I will be defining leadership in terms of 'influence' which emanates from God's image and is directed again to the restoration of that same image of God in humanity.

### **African Conceptions of Leadership, Identity, and Authority**

In order to contextualize a much-needed theology of leadership, one must have a deepening understanding of the world view and needs within that culture; these can be expressed in terms of myths, traditions, rituals, and sayings within a culture which carry cultural information. Obviously, the deeper one can probe the worldview, the deeper one can contextualize the theological truths.

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<sup>1</sup> As a Western theologian in Africa, I readily acknowledge my limitations in terms of contextualization within the African culture. My purpose has never been to propose the answers, but rather to be a catalyst and facilitator for (and with) my African brothers and sisters.

Within the traditional African worldview, leadership, religion, and the community were<sup>2</sup> all intertwined within a collective whole. One could not separate the religious from the 'secular' as Western culture is known for doing, for the religious affects all of life, and was therefore fundamental to the identity, authority, and responsibilities of the leaders. As such, in the past, there were different levels of leadership: kings/queens, chiefs, prophets, medicine men and women, diviners, priests, elders, and finally, leaders of family groups. In all of these, however, the spiritual dimension was incorporated into the identity and responsibilities of the leader.

### **Identity of the African Leader**

One of the most comprehensive features of African society is the collective identity of the community. John Mbiti's often repeated saying, "I am, because we are," captures the essence of this identity. In terms of leadership, the collective identity is only reinforced and strengthened by the corresponding identity of the leader. Laurenti Magesa says,

Leaders at the higher social levels of the lineage, clan, sodality or ethnic group represent and personify the life-force of the entire people more intensively than the family heads. They also personify the order of the world and the harmony that enables its life to continue for the benefit of humanity. This implies that the vital force of these leaders -- or the lack of it -- signifies the actual conditions and environment of the entire society.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, E. Evans Pritchard, in his study on the Shillunk of Sudan, says that "a king symbolizes a whole society,"<sup>4</sup> while Mbiti further

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<sup>2</sup> My intention in using the past tense is signify that the traditional African world is changing as a result of global influences (i.e. secularism). There are still places where the traditional elements are highly instrumental in the lives of the people, but that global influences are more significant with respect to leadership. For a good treatment on this subject, see Victor Cole, "Concepts of Pastoral Leadership in Africa: A Case Study," in *AJET* 9:2 (1990).

<sup>3</sup> Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications, 1997), 217.

<sup>4</sup> E. Evans-Pritchard, "The Divine Kingship of the Shillunk of the Nilotic Sudan," in *Social Anthropology and Other Essays* (New York: The Free Press of Glenscoe, 1962), 210.

promotes this concept by saying that such leaders are the “divine symbol of their people’s health and welfare.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the identity of the leader is the responsibility of the entire community because the prosperity and identity of the community is directly related to that leader’s identity.

I was living in Tanzania at the time when the first President of the country, Julius Nyerere, died. Nyerere, or Baba wa Taifa (Father of the Nation) as he was affectionately called, carried the collective identity of the Tanzanian people on his shoulders. It would not be an understatement to say that the entire country lost something of its identity with the death of their great President. His leadership transcended tribal barriers and his influence continued to grow even after he left office. Despite the relative failure of his economic policies, Julius Nyerere embodied the hopes and dreams of his people, which could readily be observed in the days of mourning following his death. This reality of collective leadership identity carries powerful spiritual truths and necessitates that we next examine authority for its relevance and relationship to identity.

### **Authority of the African Leader**

If the identity of the people proceeds from the leader’s identity, where might the authority of the leader come from? There are two answers to this: first, the leader’s authority comes from God. Mbiti says, “It may be said that the first ruler was sent down from the sky by God, or was called or chosen by God to become king, . . . For that reason the ruler has names of praise like, ‘child of God,’ ‘son of God,’ and ‘the chosen of God.’”<sup>6</sup> In so far as the leader arises from the authority of God, he likewise represents to the people some knowledge or words from God. In this context, Mbiti says that kings are “divine or sacral rulers, the shadow or reflection of God’s rule in the universe.”<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, the leader’s authority is reinforced by the submission, obedience, and perpetual loyalty from the community. This authority,

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<sup>5</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann Press, 1969), 181.

<sup>6</sup> John Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nairobi, Kenya: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1975), 162.

<sup>7</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 181.

and the rights and privileges entailed to it, were usually for the life of the leader, until his death. The reason for this was because of the leader-follower identity. Therefore, among the Luo community of Western Kenya, the king (or, ruoth), "derived his authority from his clan or sub tribe . . . . He was a semi-sacred person, because he represented not only the tribesmen that were alive, but also those who were buried in the tribal land."<sup>8</sup> If the leader derived his authority from God, he also received it from the people. This enabled the community to function around the identity of the leader. Hence, we witness the movement from identity to authority, and then back to identity again.

### **Responsibilities of the African Leader**

In as much as traditional African leadership arose out of identity and authority, it also came with various responsibilities. By virtue of the leader's proximity to God (in terms of authority and knowledge), the leader was compelled to use that authority and knowledge to preserve the community and reinforce its collective identity. Therefore, such responsibilities included: "to pass on tradition,"<sup>9</sup> "the security and safety of their people,"<sup>10</sup> and "to see to it that things are right between the visible and the invisible world and in the visible world itself."<sup>11</sup>

There was no dichotomy between the spiritual needs of the people and those which might be termed 'secular.' As such, while there were spiritual specialists within the ranks of leaders (i.e. mediums, diviners, medicine men/women), the traditional leader also occupied significant spiritual power. This power, which arose from his rights as leader, was to be used for the fundamental needs of the people--whether seen or unseen. Magesa focuses upon this particular facet by stating, "In practical terms, the most significant purpose of existence of these

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<sup>8</sup> William R. Ochieng', "Colonial African Chiefs - Were They Primarily Self-seeking Scoundrels?" in *Politics and Nationalism in Colonial Kenya*, ed. Bethwell A. Ogot (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1972), 49. Inherent within this picture is also the involvement of the ancestors. For the purposes of this paper, I will not deal with that particular issue, yet it deserves attention in constructing an authentic, traditional understanding of African leadership.

<sup>9</sup> Magesa, 70.

<sup>10</sup> Mbiti, 163.

<sup>11</sup> Magesa, 71.

leaders is to guard the power of life in the community.”<sup>12</sup>

Inherent within this picture one witnesses a very fascinating cycle of leader-follower identity: God gives the leader authority, which the people embrace. The people therefore believe it is for their identity (benefit) that they preserve, maintain, and develop the leader, who, for his part, has various responsibilities to perform for the benefit of the common good. Having performed these, he is further blessed by God, esteemed as a leader by the people, and continues with his responsibilities to the people.

Of course, what has been developed here is a representation of the highest leader within the given society, but elements of this identity-authority-responsibility cycle would continue down the structure of society and would be represented even (and especially) at the lower levels of leadership (i.e. family leadership). Furthermore, the reader will note that what has been developed is the ideal for that community. More often, the ideal was not attained and the leader took the privileges of his position to benefit and serve himself, rather than the people.

While the focus in the preceding section has primarily centred on the traditional past, the intrinsic elements of identity, authority, and responsibility are present and essential to understanding contemporary African leadership. The task for the remainder of this article is to develop the fundamentals of a theology whereby the strengths of the traditional past can be further developed, while, at the same time, critiquing and correcting the abuses.

### **Fundamentals in Developing a Theology of Leadership: The Image of God<sup>13</sup>**

There are few topics as profoundly theological as leadership.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>13</sup> A proper Theology of Leadership is basically Trinitarian in nature: it begins with the Image of God the Father within us, it continues by the providence of the Son and his nature and work to restore fallen humanity, which is further strengthened by the gifting and equipping of the Holy Spirit to “build the Body” and “glorify the Head.” This article is primarily concerned with the first of these, but cannot be understood apart from the other two ‘movements’ of leadership.

While the word 'leader' (or its derivatives) only occurs 290 times in the Bible, other titles and/or verbs (expressive of influence or authority) account for another 491 uses.<sup>14</sup> God's intention as Creator was also to be our theocratic King (cf. Gn 1 Sam 8:7). Therefore, if God is the ideal King, than fundamental to any notion of true leadership must be the character of God and humanity's relationship with God, as expressed in Leviticus: 'I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people' (26:11,12 NIV)<sup>15</sup> Further-more, when the fullness of salvation history arrived, God did indeed become our King, yet through a path which was foolishness to the world (1 Cor 1:18). God's leadership is not a distant, coercive reign; rather, it is near, and intimate. God describes the intent of his leadership in a prophecy of Jeremiah:

Their leader will be one of their own; their ruler will arise from among them. I will bring him near and he will come close to me, for who is he who will devote himself to be close to me? Declares the LORD. 'So you will be my people, and I will be your God.' (Jer 30: 21-22)

Such passages form the basis of God's intent for His leadership, as well as for human leadership. Jesus Christ becomes the personification for all the ideals of identity, authority and responsibility in leadership.

How is any of this relevant to us? The answer to that question comes as we look at the Image of God in humanity. It is my belief that the Image of God affirms and defines humanity, especially in terms of its leadership, in regard to true biblical influence. The Image of God forms the basis for our identity in two complimentary roles: First, as followers, reflectors,<sup>16</sup> and worshippers of God; and second, by providing us with the essence of leadership, influence, power, and authority. These twin roles arise out of the fundamental constitution of

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<sup>14</sup> The following are an assortment of leadership words and their usage's in the Scriptures: leader: 79x; leadership: 122x; lead(s): 207x; influence: 1x; rule: 87x; govern: 17x; power:276x; authority: 88x; and guide: 22x.

<sup>15</sup> All quotations of the Bible are from the New International Version.

<sup>16</sup> Or, in the words of Jonathan Edwards, as "re-emenators" of His glory. See "A Dissertation on the End for Which God Created the World" in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*. vol. 1. Rev. by Edward Hickman (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974).

humanity and must exist together in order to establish true and real humanness. In the person of Jesus Christ we witness the perfect confluence of these roles to bring us the true representation of humanness, as well as the ideal of leadership.

The obvious retort to this statement is, 'How can I be compared with Jesus Christ? He, of course, is divine and I am not.' This demonstrates the need for a proper Christology within our development of a theology of leadership. If we elevate Christ's deity at the expense of his humanity (and so, become practical docetists; or more commonly, monophysites) then we will inevitably create a standard which is far from the reach of human aspiration, and, specifically, that of Christian leadership. Yet, if we seek to hold in tension the tenants of the hypostatic union (that Christ is fully God and fully man), then we see a human identity that is near, accessible (although in this day not perfectly), and incarnationally livable.

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ proclaims to us that God is still involved in humanity and jealous for His glory; that glory exists within humanity in the Image of God. Unless we understand the profound nature of such a concept, our leadership patterns will be merely 'patch work' philosophies and skills concerned with the appearance of the leader rather than his<sup>17</sup> identity (or, the identities of his followers). Authentic leadership begins with derived identity, proceeds to derived authority, and completes itself with obedience and responsibility to the people of God; specifically, to the corporate image of God.

### **Theological Considerations of Identity**

In as much as God gives His image to humanity, that image comes with His identity; likewise, fundamental to the character of leadership is a character of identity. As leaders, where do we derive our identity? From skills? From positions or titles? From our followers? Each of these has its value, but unless the Christian leader understands himself rightly before the Lord, true identity is not possible. This must be the starting point for any theology of leadership.

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<sup>17</sup> I am using the masculine for the same of convenience in writing. I do not mean to imply that only men can be leaders; infact, the very thesis of this article argue against that.

Jean Calvin begins his *Institutes* with the presupposition of two kinds of knowledge: (1) Knowledge of God, and (2) Knowledge of Self. These two kinds of knowledge are interrelated. My knowledge of God will inform my knowledge of self, and therefore, my subsequent knowledge of self will inevitably lead to an increased desire to know God and to worship Him as God.<sup>18</sup> Another way of stating this is to say that there is the object of glory (God) and the image of glory (humanity): the object informs the image, while the image constitutes itself as authentic when it rightly reflects the image back to the object without distortion. This process is the basis of authentic Christian identity.

Unfortunately, the image of God has been marred by the consequences of sin. True human identity has been damaged and adulterated so that the image does not reflect the object, but reflects a distorted concept of the object, or a projection of itself.<sup>19</sup> Hence, Calvin says that fallen humanity is a factory of idols. Christian leadership is dependent upon redemption in order to obtain its true and ever-developing identity.

The Biblical text is full of examples of God reaffirming His identity into the identity of the leader. Abraham is one of the most beautiful examples of such:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Gen 12:2-3)

God chooses Abraham, gives him a great name (character or identity), and commissions him to leadership. Again, we see the same within the prophet Jeremiah: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." (Jer. 1:5) God is reiterating the interrelationship between

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<sup>18</sup> See *Institutes*, I,1,1,2.

<sup>19</sup> A theology of leadership must inevitably consider the extent of sin and sin's effect on the fallen Image of God. Differing theological perspectives will affect one's optimism in regard to the influence of the non-Christian leader as well as the need for redemption within the Image of God.

identity and leadership, especially in light of the huge responsibility, which lays before the prophet. Finally, we might even consider Jesus Himself. In the waters of the Jordan, Jesus is baptized and hears the words from His Father: 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well-pleased.' (Mt 3:17). Identity involves knowledge, character, love, intimacy, authority, and subsequently, responsibility. None of this is possible unless there is a fundamental agreement between the identity of God and the identity of humanity.

If Christian leadership is to be authentic in terms of its identity, then it must above all else see the Image of God restored. This, I believe, is the internal locus of leadership, as well as the purpose and intent toward which all leadership is directed. Identity is a thirst and a hunger which can only be satisfied by the One who created us. The Psalmist rightly speaks of this: "And I -- in righteousness I will see your face; when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness" (Ps 17:15). Rather than this being some external and remote projection of identity and self, it is internal, near, and beautifully intimate. We are a temple, and the glory of God has taken its eternal residence within us (1 Cor 6:19-20). Therefore, nothing can be more basic to the posture of leadership than that which most directly relates to God's glory: the renewal of humanity as glory-bearers (2 Cor 3:18).

Hence, one might say that the fundamental identity of the Christian leader is his own character. One's character rightly follows from the image to which it corresponds. This does not mean that leadership is a possession, but a gift; hence, it is derived identity, and the derivational aspect keeps the true Christian leader humble and receptive to the object of the image. Furthermore, this image is not some abstract and nebulous fantasy of the projected self, but is real and concrete as demonstrated by Jesus Christ, who is the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." (Heb 1:3)<sup>20</sup> Jesus Christ forms the basis for the character of the leader incarnated within humanity, as He is the 'image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15; cf. Rom 8:29; Eph 2:8-10).

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<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the Image of God compels us to consider the doctrines of God's Providence, the Incarnation, and the Work of the Holy Spirit. See Gregg A. Okesson, "The Incarnation of Jesus Christ as a Hermeneutic for Understanding the Providence of God in an African Perspective" in *AJET* 22:1 (2003), 51-71.

For this reason one can say that servant leadership is the fundamental character of the Christian leader: Jesus Christ is the image of the true human; or, one can say, of the image of the true leader. To simply skip the theological basis and espouse the requirement of servant leadership leads to great confusion and even helplessness: 'How can I possibly meet the standard established by Christ?' 'How can I do something that is so contrary to my culture?' 'How is it possible for me to serve, when my sinful self tells me to be served?' Unless true identity is established within the Christian leader, servant leadership will be a process of futility. Likewise, unless character is the foundation for identity, one's leadership will be a process of continually hiding one's sinfulness, or else blaming it on others. Neither of these is real human identity and leads to the inevitable manipulations of self and others.

### **Theological Considerations of Authority**

In as much as identity is derived, the same could be said for the nature of authority. There is no real leadership apart from authority. In addition to this, one can rightly say that identity and authority are dependent upon each other. It is difficult to imagine real identity apart from real authority, even as it is ill advised to consider authority in the absence of identity. Unfortunately, our world is replete with examples of such dehumanized and partitioned examples of 'leadership': those who simply assume leadership without the identity or authority arising from the redeemed Image of God.

Where does authority come from? There might be three answers to this question, but each is dependent upon the others: (1) From God, as the creator of our Personhood; (2) From the Holy Spirit as a gift to the Body of Christ; and finally (3) From the community (or Church) as it reciprocates and authenticates the leader's authority and power over her. For the purposes of this article, I will focus primarily upon the first and third aspects. A theology of leadership calls us to consider the true identity of the leader as emanating from his derived authority, even as we contemplate one's authority as arising out of his identity. The Image of God is once again the basis for such a discussion.

In the book of Genesis, the description of the Image of God is immediately followed by commands that imply inherent (yet God-

given) authority. God creates humanity in His image (1:26a) and humanity 'rules' over the creation (1:26b). The following verses continue this parallel and expand humanity's scope of influence: 'be fruitful,' 'fill the earth and subdue it,' 'rule over . . . every living creature' (v. 28). In addition, God later says, 'I give you every seed-bearing plant on the earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. *They will be yours* for food' [emphasis mine] (v. 29). In these few verses, we see identity, authority, and responsibility as inherently connected to God's image.

A brief biblical study of the term 'authority' continues to reinforce the relationship between the giver of authority (and His identity) and that of the recipient. In the Old Testament, the word *mashal* (to rule, have dominion, and reign) is used in many different societal ways, but ultimately, "It originates in God. Man has no authority at all as man but simply as God's vice-regent."<sup>21</sup> God establishes human authority in continuity with heavenly authority. If it is His to give, then it is likewise His to remove; hence, the words of Samuel to Saul: 'because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king. (1 Samuel 15:23b).' This is why the concept of the image is so important: an image reflects the object; it does not stand on its own, but is intrinsically and completely dependent in nature. In the New Testament, *exousia* (authority) "denotes the absolute possibility of action that is proper to God alone as the source of power and legality."<sup>22</sup> Jesus demonstrates that authority has been given to Him (Mt 9:6-8; 28:18) as evidenced by forgiving sins (Mk 2:10), having power over nature (Mk 4:39ff), sickness (Lk 8:46-48), death (Mk 5:41ff), demons (Mk 3:15), and demonstrating influence in his teaching (Mt 7:29; Mk 11:28).

In fact, the truest expression of derived authority is found in the act of giving it to others: "Freely you have received, freely give. (Mt 10:8b)"<sup>23</sup> The essence of Jesus' authority is found in the way that he

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<sup>21</sup> R. Laid Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Walke. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 534.

<sup>22</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Kittel, abridged in one volume by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 239.

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, in his commentary on Matthew, comments regarding this verse: "Consider whence you derived this power. As it flowed without an y merit of

gives it to his disciples (cf. Mt 10:1; 28: 18ff; Jn 20:21-23). This is evidenced by the way he speaks of 'being sent by the Father' as well as 'sending the disciples' (Jn 17:18). A comprehensive study of the biblical texts (not possible in the context of this article) reveals that (1) authority is derivative in nature; (2) true authority comes from God;<sup>24</sup> (3) authority is not permanent, except in the case of the Son of God; and (4) the ultimate expression of authority is found in the act of giving it to others.

This brief study forms the foundation for considering human authority in the context of leadership. All humans do not have the gift of leadership; rather, all have the intrinsic capacity for leadership as emanating from the image of God. On a broader scale, all gifts of the Holy Spirit arise out of the 'natural' constitution of humanity,<sup>25</sup> yet with an influence determined by the Spirit Himself. This is not to de-supernaturalize Christian leadership, for the image of God is amazingly supernatural. The manner in which the gifting of the Holy Spirit works in accordance with the Image of God expresses a continuity of God's faithfulness to His image that resides within humanity: a faithfulness which is constantly governed by the work of the Son in providence.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, a study on authority and the image of God causes one to consider the practical manifestations of God's glory because, I believe, authority is a representation of glory, especially as it emanates from the

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yours from the purse grace of God, it is proper that, through your agency, it should flow freely to others." *Harmony of Matthew, Mark and Luke*, vol. 1, trans by Rev. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: eerdmans, 1956), 442.

<sup>24</sup> This concept does raise some interesting questions: "Will we possess authority in the future Kingdom of God?" "Will human (yet glorified) authority be eternal in nature?" "Will there be any continuity between earthly and heavenly authority?" (cf. Mt 19:28; I Cor 6:2,3; Rev 5:10; 22:5).

<sup>25</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Volf, likewise, seems to affirm this when he supports an "interactional model" of the bestowal of the charismata. He says, "I acquire the charismata from the Spirit of God through interaction with myself, that is, with that which I am by nature and that which I have become in society on the basis of my disposition and abilities, and through interaction with the church and the world in which I find myself." (p.233)

<sup>26</sup> For an excellent study on the practical out workings of the doctrine of Providence in the development of a leader's life, see Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988).

character of God. When we consider glory, we are likely to imagine a picture similar to Isaiah's vision: apocalyptic imagery, seraphs, smoke, and the holiness of the LORD. This is most certainly a representation of God's being, but is not humanity itself a wonderful attestation of His glory? This is not to deify humanity, but to express the profound nature of humanity as glory-bearing. The question lies before us: will our authority arise from God's glory and work to achieve the same; or, will it seek to steal and corrupt God's glory, using it for its own interests? The answer to this question largely determines the extent to which authority can be given. This is the second facet of derivational authority -- not only is it given by God, but it can be given to one another. A leader receives a trust: from God, and also from his followers. This trust can be developed and can actually grow in power and in influence, yet it can also be compromised. Part of the responsibility of leadership is to exert its authority and power in such a way that the follower actually reciprocates and gives to the leader greater authority and power. This will be developed to a greater extent later.

### **Theological Considerations of Responsibility**

Human responsibility follows identity and authority as the third and final consideration in terms of the Image of God and leadership, and fundamentally, where the former aspects are evidenced, livable, and even tested for their validity. This topic is the basis for many fine books on Christian leadership, yet unless the theological foundations for leadership are fully developed, much of our musing can amount to merely 'self-help' techniques and external improvements. My overall purpose has been to demonstrate that the Image of God is the internal locus of Christian leadership as well as the purpose toward which leadership must be directed. Therefore, having presented the foundations for the identity and authority of the leader, we must now address this final aspect: the purpose toward which leadership exists.

#### **a. The Restoration of the Image of God**

Leadership must begin and end with God's glory because the essential character of humanity is that of a glory-bearer. God reveals this within the account of the creation story and further reinforces it throughout the pages of salvation history. In Isaiah, God says, "Bring

my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth -- everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." (43:6b-7) This verse expresses the interrelationship between creation, purpose, identity, and authority, yet in reverse order: (1) creation: 'whom I formed and made;' (2) purpose: 'whom I created for my glory;' (3) identity: 'everyone who is called by my name;' and finally, (4) authority: 'Bring my sons . . . my daughters.' Therefore, all of the fundamental facets of leadership arise out of the human constitution as the Image of God.

If such is the case, and if the leader acknowledges that this is his identity, then the next step is to affirm that it is likewise the identity of all people. There are no 'ordinary' people. All of humanity carries this image within themselves and are likewise glory-bearers; as such, all are moving either steadily toward God's glory, or toward corrupting God's glory.<sup>27</sup> What does this mean for the purposes of leadership?

We must conclude that if the leader is dependent upon God's glory for his ability to influence, and all of humanity bears the Image of God, then the basic responsibility of the leader is to see God's glory within humanity "being transformed with ever-increasing glory." (2 Cor 3:18) In other words, that humanity would be restored (qualitatively) to the original purposes of God in creation. This is the intent behind all of God's efforts within the world; therefore, as "vice-regents" of God's Kingdom, the leader must assume the identity, authority, and also, the responsibility of cooperating with God in restoring the corporate Image of His glory within the world. This is not to say that humanity is solely responsible for such a task. Such an idea would not only be idolatrous, but foolish as well; rather, humans have the privilege of participating in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4). Paul understood his authority in this same manner: 'For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it.' (2 Cor 10:8; cf 13:10) Leadership has many functions, yet unless all revolve around the glory of God within humanity, we are prone to become irrelevant to the purposes of God by focusing upon skills rather than identity.

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<sup>27</sup> See C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1949).

This responsibility toward redeeming the individual and corporate image of God has many facets and cannot be limited to any specific, 'spiritual' task. It must involve a true holistic picture of the human constitution: including, but not limited to, the mind, body, emotions, will, conscience, and relationships. Edmund Clowney says, "The renewal of God's image restores us as heirs of physical life, called to guard the structures of family, sexuality, personality and society that defend life. Yet even that task cannot be attempted apart from the nurture of spiritual life in the church as a heavenly society."<sup>28</sup> Therefore, in order to influence and transform life, the Body of Christ must first understand her identity as the People of God. This cannot be accomplished without a corresponding understanding of the implications of God's glory, and God's faithfulness to that glory. This knowledge of self transcends mere self-esteem as we have often grown to interpret it as 'feeling good about oneself,' but calls us to delve into the deeper meanings of why we can feel good about ourselves; it encourages us beyond individual competency, but rather leads us to the very basis for such skills and aptitudes; and finally, such an insight causes us to think of our human relationships as something much more powerful and beautiful than networking and name-dropping, but as interdependent identities which coexist with creational properties, thus mirroring the God-Head. Therefore, we need a holistic picture of the Image of God in order to find the very basis for which leadership exists. It is now necessary for me to develop these concepts in more detail.

#### **b. Power from the Image of God**

Humans are created in the image of God, which necessitates that we understand, as best we can through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:10-14), that we mirror God in His essential character without compromising the fundamental Creator-Creation distinction. This involves, but is not limited to, characteristics intrinsic within humanity, such as love, communication, relationship, inter-dependency, character, reason, governance, and even creativity. In as much as these characteristics are fundamental to the image of God, they are likewise fundamental to the nature and task of leadership.

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<sup>28</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 140. This, likewise, is the theological basis for mentoring.

To demonstrate the intrinsic power of the Image of God, let us look at one such example: love. It is difficult to imagine any characteristic of God which has greater creative properties. God was not externally bound to create; rather, we see the beauty of his love by means of His creative act. Furthermore, as we go beyond this fact, God's creative act was for the very purposes of love: to establish a people who are called by His Name (Eph 1:4ff). He did not create to demonstrate that He had the power to do so, but His purpose behind creation was to have intimate and covenantal relationship with His creation. Likewise, God's love is never stagnant, but is continuously creational: not as new, original acts of creation, but as continuous and faithful actions to His original purposes (providence). As such, God's love is directive (Ps 42:8); protective (Isa 38:17); self-giving (Jn 3:16); self-revelational (Jn 14:21); sacrificial (Rom 5:8). It calls to us (Hos 11:1); comes and abides with us (Jn 14:23; 2 Cor 13:11); unifies us (Jn 17:23); and finally, it is creational/restorative (Eph 2:4-5). If we have been loved by God, we are to reflect that love back to God by loving one another (1 Jn 4:7-12).

Therefore, as love is creational and emanates from the character and glory of God, so also humanity is endowed with such Godlike influence which proceeds from the image of God within us. As God's 'vice-regents,' who have been loved by God, we are able to participate in the work of His kingdom as we reflect that love back to God by loving one another (1 Jn 4:7-12). This power, when rightly used, carries the authority of God for the purposes of changing lives (2 Pet 1:3). Helmut Thielicke expresses the beauty of the creational properties of love by telling a simple story:

I once knew a very old married couple who radiated a tremendous happiness. The wife especially, who was almost unable to move because of old age and illness and in whose kind old face the joys and sufferings of many years had etched a hundred runes, was filled with such gratitude for life that I was touched to the quick. Involuntarily I asked myself what could possibly be the source of this kindly old person's radiance? Otherwise they were very common people and their room indicated only the most modest comfort. But suddenly I knew where it all came from, for I saw these two speaking to each other and their eyes hanging upon each other. All at once it became clear to me that this woman was dearly loved. And it was as if she were like a stone that has been lying in the sun for years and years, absorbing all its

radiant warmth, and now was reflecting back cheerfulness and warmth and serenity.

Let me express it this way. It was not because she was this kind of a cheerful and pleasant person that she was loved by her husband all these years. It was probably the other way around. Because she was so loved, she became the person I now saw before me.

And it is exactly the same with our relation to God . . . One who does not love makes the other person wither and dry up. And one who does not allow himself to be loved dries up too. For love is a creative thing.<sup>29</sup>

There is a profound truth within this story that carries enormous implications for leadership: intrinsic to influence is the Image of God which is itself dependent upon the object which it mirrors. In as much as God is love and governs the world by His love, so also the leaders of the world are called to influence (and create) the world by His love. This does not mean that humanity has the very same capacity to create as does the Creator, but rather, we are given the responsibility of partnering with God's sustaining work of creation as it relates to the restoration of the Image of God within humanity. In a like manner, we could also speak of other "seats of power" within the human constitution; for example, the power of communication (Ja 3:9-12), character (2 Cor 3:3), and our minds (Eph 4:20-24) as they directly relate to the work of restoring the Image of God within humanity.

### **c. The Priesthood of all Believers**

It is one thing to state that the purpose of leadership is the restoration of the Image of God within humanity, but quite another to describe how this might take place. To develop this, we must again return to the nature of the God-Head. The Trinity is a self-unified, self-communicative, self-giving, and self-dependent community of the one God, which is perfect and complete in all ways, yet still dynamic.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, as the corporate picture of the Image of God, the Church expresses fundamental truths of the God-Head, yet in a finite and

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<sup>29</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *How the World Began* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 99-101.

<sup>30</sup> A deeper study of the Trinity is beyond the scope of this article, yet for a good treatment n the subject, see Volf, *After Our Likeness*.

limited form. Volf says,

The symmetrical reciprocity of the relations of the Trinitarian persons finds its correspondence in the image of the church in which all members serve one another with their specific gifts of the Spirit in imitation of the Lord and through the power of the Father. Like the divine persons, they all stand in a relation of mutual giving and receiving.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, the leader who bears the Image of God, who acknowledges the Image of God within humanity, and who seeks to restore the Image of God (corporately) within the Church, must utilize and depend upon the multifaceted strengths of the corporate body: her gifts, her interdependency, her self-communication, and her self-service. For the leader, this means not only a responsibility to the Church to see her blossom and flourish as all members serve and give to one another, but it also requires a responsibility from the community that they would hold the leader accountable to the tasks intrinsic to this goal.

The Priesthood of all Believers reminds the leader of the difference between status and function.<sup>32</sup> The former arises out of the image of God and is equally bestowed upon all humanity, while the latter also arises fundamentally out of the image of God, but which also comes through the gifting of the Spirit. Status tells us that all Christians are all of a spiritual state, while function tells us that there are different responsibilities within the Body.<sup>33</sup> Function does not make a leader more important, but more accountable to the Body. In fact, function arises from within the Church even as it seeks the good of the Church.

Finally, the Priesthood of all Believers encourages the leader to remember that he is not alone, and is not self-dependent. One of the greatest temptations of leadership is to worship the work of his own hands. We witness this failure in the accounts of Samson, Saul, David, Nebuchadnezzar, Herod the Great and many others throughout the annals of history. Leadership is a gift -- from God and from others.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>32</sup> See Martin Luther, *Appeal to the German Nobility* (1520) for his distinction of status and function.

<sup>33</sup> I am indebted to Alister McGrath for these insights as recorded from his lectures at Regent College on the topic of "Theology of Leadership," 1993.

Volf expresses this twofold reality by saying, "ordination is to be understood as a public reception of a charisma given by God and focused on the local church as a whole."<sup>34</sup> It is never a possession, but is a function, a character, and a responsibility. The leader needs the Body of Christ just as the Church needs the leader.

To summarize, the responsibility of the leader must arise from his own identity before God, beginning with the wondrous and humbling realization of the profound nature of the Image of God. Self-identity arises from the springs of God-given authority, which in itself begins with character and relationship and only then proceeds to function. Authority has many faces, but must primarily be understood as emanating from the Person and character of the GodHead. Finally, such authority carries with it daily responsibility back to the People of God: so that the corporate Image of God can be built up and renewed in the nature of Jesus Christ.

### **Issues for an African Theology of Leadership**

What does this mean for the African Church? How should such issues affect the identity, authority, and responsibilities of leadership within the African context? These are the fundamental questions that must test the validity and strength of the theology. Again, my purpose in this article is not to attempt a contextualized theology of leadership, but only to pave the way for such to be accomplished. Therefore, the points that follow are, I believe, the crucial ones in order to launch this task.

#### **Identity of the African Leader**

There is no subject more central to the task of leadership than identity. In few places is this as strong as in Africa. In a recent article within the Kenyan Daily Nation, the writer says, "As a country, we are far too leader-centred. If the leader does not speak for a week, we get terribly nervous: we begin to believe that the country is falling apart!"<sup>35</sup> This reinforces what we noted earlier: the African community is built

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<sup>34</sup> Volf, 249.

<sup>35</sup> Mutahi Ngunyi, *Daily Nation* (Nairobi, Kenya), Sunday, 26, October 2003.

around the identity of their leaders -- this is both an enormous strength (demonstrating the potential possibilities for influence), as well as a grave weakness (in such cases where the leader fails in his responsibilities).

The image of God calls the leader to remember and understand the fundamental constitution of humanity as interdependent and glory-bearing. Where this is not understood, or neglected, the leader is prone to use the 'glory' emanating from the God-Head to his own advantage, and as a tool of manipulation against the people. Yet, in cases when the leader embraces this identity, he is then free to love, serve, give, and even discipline the people so as to develop the purposes of God within them.

Paul expresses this concept in 1 Peter 2:16: 'Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.' If we understand that our identity emanates from the Image of God within us, then we are released to live and express that identity in a manner intended by God before all creation. This is captured in perfect form in the person of Jesus Christ, the very 'image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15). Therefore, the identity of the leader must be realized in conformity to the image of the Son; thus, the theological rationale for servant leadership.

Likewise, the issue of identity arises as African leaders view themselves within a global, changing world. In such instances where the African leader does not understand his theological basis for identity, he may be tempted to turn to the Western world for authenticity and self-validity. This is a dangerous game. Why are we to believe that the Western world can validate African leadership? Are we not assuming too much when we state that Western leadership is itself built around the proper foundation? Yes, in fact we make hazardous corollaries of identity as based upon money, status, position, title, and global recognition. These bases of identity will only disappoint, and will often be used to oppress and manipulate the people, rather than to serve them.

There is a desperate need within the African Church today for servant leaders: not leaders who occasionally carry the mantle of servant hood so as to impress the followers with a sense of humility; but rather real servant leaders, whose identities arise from the very creation

act and is developed by a growing awareness of conformity to the Image of the Son. Jesus said, "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good . . . , for a tree is recognized by its fruit." (Mt 12:33) God has already provided humanity with all that it needs in order to be authentic, real, and impacting in the world. Leadership in the African context will seek to develop that as servant leaders in the image of His son.

### **Authority within African Leadership**

In as much as one's identity forms the bedrock for leadership, identity tends to mirror authority. Likewise, we may say that authority validates identity. Therefore, what is the authority of the African leader? Where does it come from? To whom is it given? As we have seen earlier, within traditional African culture, the leader receives his identity from God and from his followers. There is much to commend about this from a theological perspective.

In fact, if we return to the image of God and understand the intrinsic authority that comes from being a glory-bearer, we must in fact acknowledge its origin as coming from God. Then, to the extent that the leader uses that authority for the benefit of the people, they, in turn, give it back to the leader with increasing measure. Thus we see the twofold nature of authority.

Yet, for the purposes of the African context, we must likewise critique the erroneous conceptions of authority, especially those associated with external criteria; namely, position, titles, degrees, and status. In and of themselves, these bases of authority have their legitimacy, yet not as the sole seats of power and authority. The insecure leader, who does not understand his identity as arising from the image of God, will inevitably rely upon such external validations, yet with minimal long-term influence. Rather, true spiritual influence arises from within: from one's character, from relationship, and from identity. In God's economy of things, he has provided humanity with supernatural influence on this earth, but emanating from His own glory, and rightly returning to the same. If we fail to understand and embrace such concepts, we become idolaters of His glory and our influence becomes antithetical to the Kingdom of God.

God has given to humanity a gift of eternal and cataclysmic

proportions. Christian leadership and authority are not safe, domesticated concepts with which humanity can experiment for its own use. We are dealing with God's glory: within ourselves and within those whom we lead; therefore, we must be cautioned regarding God's jealousy for His glory (read, 'authority'). If God is the giver of leadership, and it is authenticated through the community of faith, then God can likewise take such influence away from the leader (as can the community of God). Thus, we can find no theological rationale for African leadership which exists for the life of the individual.

### **Responsibilities of the African Leader**

In as much as the African leader understands that his identity comes from the image of God, and reinforced by the corporate image of the community of God; and in as much as the African leader embraces his own authority as coming from the same, then the task and responsibilities of the leader continue likewise: to the restoration of the image of God within the African community. This task involves, but is not limited to: identity, service, utilization of the Priesthood of all Believers, sacrifice, and the imitation of Christ.

Perhaps one of the models of leadership, which most clearly communicates the essence of this, is spiritual mentoring. Mentoring places the leader and the follower in a close, intimate relationship. It is active, intentional, and receptive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, while there are many differing types of mentoring, it has its origin from the human constitution and seeks to develop the same; meaning, to develop a person as God had intended that they should be. Therefore, it is highly personal and seeks beauty (God's beauty) within that person for the glory of God. One might say that goodness is the foundation for mentoring (Gal 6:9-10), yet we need a higher definition of 'good' than merely a solitary act of service: goodness is creational to the image of God (cf. Tit 2:14; 3:8) and mentoring is central to that purpose.

There is a sense in which African leadership believes that it must be distant and removed from the people. I believe that this position has no theological basis, and is actually antithetical to the purposes of leadership. Spiritual mentoring, when rightly understood, is a corrective to this misunderstanding for it places the leader and the

follower in a close, intimate, and reciprocal relationship: fostering, trust, love, service, and giving -- all qualities which lead to the growth of the image of God.

### **Conclusion**

This article has not attempted to establish a complete theology of leadership, just the initial step. One issue, which is central to this discussion, is the connection between the Image of God, the Providence of God, and finally, the gifting of the Holy Spirit. The author believes that while the gifting of the Holy Spirit is foundational to spiritual leadership, it arises out of the Image of God, and is usually developed by the providence of God.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, gifting should not be looked at in isolation. This article has attempted to establish the fundamental identity of leadership as arising from the image of God: which, the author believes, is both the internal locus of leadership as well as the ultimate purpose toward which leadership must be directed.

Africa is a rich landscape for the development of a theology of leadership, yet the needs are urgent and arise out of the frequent abuses of power and position. As is most often the case, theology does not have the privilege of leisure. The theologian's task arises out of concrete issues, which are affecting the lives and faith of the people of God. Leadership is no luxury, but is a function intimately related to the glory of God. As leaders, we must grow to understand, appreciate, and ultimately embrace the glory of God in leadership; it guards us from idolatry and sends us into intimate participation in the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>36</sup> This does not mean to limit the work of the Holy Spirit, as he "gives them to each one, just as he determines (1 Cor 12:11)," but to acknowledge that the development of a leader is inherently Trinitarian in nature.

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