

Three Leadership Paradoxes

by Joshua Rey



Joshua Rey

Leadership is full of paradoxes, but Christians are used to paradoxes and should be able to embrace this. Joshua Rey here explores the three paradoxes of walking away from leadership, wanting to lead but not wanting to be a leader, and being responsible but acting irresponsibly

Nutritious paradoxes

For Christians, the idea of leadership often has a paradoxical quality. This is not to say that Christians and leadership don't mix. It is to say that leadership, both the how and the why, are or should be inherently puzzling for Christians. But it is also to say that in unpicking that puzzle we can learn some things about leadership and our relationship to it that should give us an edge.

It's only fair to acknowledge at the outset that my own experience of leadership, though not insignificant, is quite limited. And I have not always done leadership well. If the observations I make here are of value this will be to some extent because, proverbially, a lesson in folly is worth two in sense. My credentials as a leader come from careers in investment banking followed by assignments in disaster relief. In addition to my

own experience as a leader I also draw on observation of other leaders both from below and from one side.

One thing of which I am confident, however, is that where there is a need to grapple with paradox and apparent self-contradiction, Christians should be at an advantage. And leadership is, for Christians, paradoxical.

We do, after all, believe that Jesus was both God and man. This is a proposition that defies reason. One can imagine a man; one can perhaps imagine some things about God; but to imagine God who is also a man defies reason. To say that someone is both God and man is far more peculiar than to say that someone is both an aardvark and an abacus. Yet we do believe this astounding truth. And from the collision between this truth and our human reason flow all the most challenging and

nutritious ideas we have about who we are and where we fit into the universe.

In short, paradox makes us strong. We have a track record of relishing paradox, and by embracing it making something wonderful from it. This may be a fruitful way to approach the topic of Christian leadership.

You get to leadership by walking away from it

The first paradoxical aspect of leadership is that it is like Alice's looking-glass garden -

"I think I'll go and meet her" said Alice, for, though the flowers were interesting enough, she felt that it would be far grander to have a talk with a real Queen. "You can't possibly do that," said the Rose: 'I should advise you to walk the other way.'¹

St Peter in the Gospels often takes on a prominent and

opinionated role among the Apostles, and just as often comes to grief.² Only when he has come face to face with his own solitary weakness after Jesus has been arrested, is he ready to become the rock on which Jesus builds his church. Gideon several times tries to talk God out of placing him at the head of Israel's army³. David goes to great lengths to avoid taking Saul's crown by force⁴.

In secular leadership, too, a period in the wilderness is often a necessary preparation. Churchill only had the moral authority to lead during the second world war because he had not been a leader in the years before it began. The Duke of



Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington
 ■ (William Beechey, c.1822) ■

Wellington wrote to a man who was seeking promotion, "not withstanding the numerous favours that I have received from the Crown, I have never solicited one... I recommend to you the same conduct and patience"⁵.

Wellington almost certainly was ambitious. However, the distinctive power he was able to exercise flowed not only from his abilities and energy, but also from his idea of himself as a servant of the State. "I am *nimmukwallah*, as we say in the East; that is, I have eaten of the King's salt, and therefore I conceive it to be my duty to serve

with unhesitating zeal and cheerfulness, when and wherever the King or his Government may think proper to employ me."⁶

There are no doubt numerous exceptions to this principle. People often do obtain positions of leadership because they want power for its own sake and follow their desire. But the leaders who achieve something of lasting worth are usually those who don't

pursue leadership as an end in itself. It's noticeable that Wellington's attitudes to leadership were very different from those of Napoleon, the proto-Nietzschean superman – the original totalitarian, who brought death and destruction to

large tracts of Europe.

My own modest experience of leadership has borne out the idea that you get to it by walking away from it. As a cradle atheist I was always keen to be a leader. Being able to tell other people what to do is a way to find significance - to fill space from which one is trying to exclude God. And oddly enough I never found myself in charge of anyone but my secretary. But having been convinced that the propositions of the Christian faith were true, got baptised and thrown in my job in the City, I soon found myself in a number

of interesting leadership roles, mostly in aid work.

All this should come as no surprise to the Christian. St Peter tells elders "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve..."⁷. St Paul says "God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong"⁸. The most famous teaching of Jesus that relates to leadership is

"You know that the leaders of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."⁹

And of course, at the centre of the Christian story is the idea that true power comes from laying aside power. Although this is a challenging (and in the world's eyes illogical) approach to leadership, it is no mere impractical piety. The experience of secular leadership is that walking away from leadership is very often a precondition for exercising leadership well.

One should want to lead but not want to be a leader

None of this is to say that leadership is bad. It is not inherently wrong to enjoy leading, or to want to lead, just as it is perfectly reasonable to want

to use any other skill, when there is an opportunity to use it for good. People who are good at carpentry get fidgety when they see ham-handed bodgers at work and naturally want to instruct...help... take over. Just so, natural leaders who see leadership being done badly want to do it themselves.

Not only that, but wanting to lead is in the essence of doing it well. It's hard to be confident about doing something one doesn't want to do: but confidence is something people look for in leaders. It's hard to enthuse people when one is not oneself enthusiastic. Leadership is one of those activities one has to do with a whole heart, not grudgingly or holding something in reserve.

A second paradoxical aspect of leadership is that whilst wanting to *do* leadership is good and valuable, it is dangerous to aspire to *be* a leader. People who want the role, the position, the chains of office, the job title, very often do not end up leading well.

I would say my best excursions into leadership have been those where there is a task to do that has some value and shape of its own. Then leadership is one of the tools to get the job done. But I am not a leader. My leadership failures have come when I have aspired to a role (usually with the fatal word "director" in the title) where a team of subordinates comes with the position, but the end goal is not clear. When I have *been* a leader I have not led well. When I have led well it has been when leadership was something to *do*.

In Christian terms, wanting to lead can be a form of wanting to serve; but wanting to be a leader is often a kind of idolatry. This both poses a challenge and offers an opportunity for the Christian leader. The challenge is that Christian leadership can be uncomfortable and exposed. You're only a leader whilst you're leading. You can't put any stock in the big office or the business card with raised type. You're not allowed to draw any comfort from your position of eminence. You have to be shoulder to shoulder with everyone else; and then, just when things get most difficult, take on the extra burdens of directing, encouraging, planning and challenging.

The opportunity is that this is the kind of leadership that works; and the Christian has not just an obligation to lead this way, but also a foundation on which to do it. After all, why does anyone want the trappings of office? Because it brings security and self-belief. If all you have is a duty to lead, who are you? But if you have the gold braid and the epaulettes then you have the comforting delusion that you know who you are: you're a Leader.

The Christian, however, knows that we're all equally wretched, and occupying high office with numerous fawning underlings won't change that. "He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing"¹⁰. And the Christian has an identity that is independent of any role or position in a hierarchy, as an

adopted child in God's family, which is entirely secure.

Not only that, but the Christian leader does not bear such a great weight of responsibility as the secular leader. We are not at the top of the food chain. God gives us our tasks and we do them the best we can. At most, "we

are God's fellow-workers"¹¹. But like the Centurion in the Gospels, we know our place – "I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me"¹². If in exercising leadership one is doing, as best one sees it, God's will, then the outcome is in God's hands.

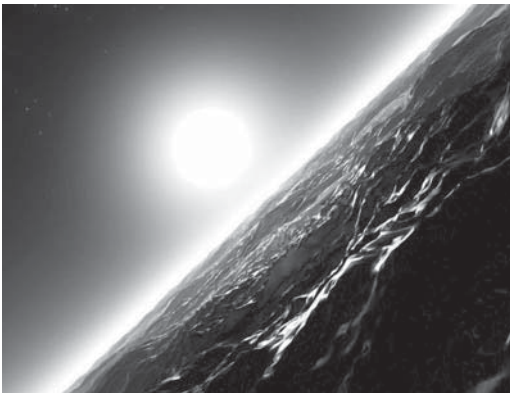
The confidence that comes from understanding who's in charge is of course an ideal. It is often not a reality, or not a reality all the time, for Christians in leadership – as I can attest. But it is available, and reliably available.



■ Epaulettes and gold braid ■
Napoleon Bonaparte (Paul Delaroche)

Leadership is responsible but has to be exercised irresponsibly

This kind of confidence is also very helpful in facing up to my third and last leadership paradox. This is that the leader is responsible, but has to act irresponsibly. Perhaps the most interesting systematic difference between management and leadership is that leaders are short of information. Leaders deal with longer time frames, with questions of value as well as questions of fact, with choices of direction, and with unexplored territory. A management task can usually be defined and evaluated without much ambiguity. Leadership involves judgement. A situation that doesn't involve judgement, and in which a decision can be referred to unambiguous evidence, is not a situation where leadership is required.



■ *What is the way to the abode of light?* ■

At the same time, leadership is the most critical function in any organisation. It is leadership that sets the framework within which management and all the other functions get done. Good

leadership establishes clarity and shared values that are necessary for sustained collaboration.

So leadership is highly responsible. But it involves doing things that in other walks of life would seem irresponsible: acting without knowing what the outcome will be; making decisions on insufficient evidence; backing a minority point of view.

Doing this right calls for a peculiar combination of humility and confidence. The confidence, for the Christian leader, comes from knowing that we are on God's turf: "my sword does not bring me victory; but you give us victory over our enemies"¹³. The humility comes from recognising that it is *never* possible to know everything.

What is the way to the abode of light?

And where does darkness reside?

Can you take them to their places?

*Do you know the paths to their dwellings?*¹⁴

No, we don't know these things. Yet God has placed us on the earth with the expectation that we will do something whilst we are here, and by the light he gives us we move forward. The Christian leader has to do all the arduous planning, negotiating, ordering and encouraging that secular leadership calls for. But in the end the Christian leader should be able to take with great confidence that necessary extra step that leadership always entails, off the end of the diving board, through

the darkened doorway, onto the edge of the glacier. For as it says in the book of Proverbs,

*In his heart a man plans his course, But the Lord determines his steps.*¹⁵ ■

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Notes

- 1 Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass, Complete Works of Lewis Carroll*, Nonesuch Press, 1939, p.148
- 2 e.g. Matthew 16:22-23; Luke 9:33; John 13:8
- 3 e.g. Judges 6:15; Judges 6:39
- 4 e.g. 1 Samuel 24:4
- 5 John Keegan, *The Mask of Command*, Jonathan Cape, 1987, p.144
- 6 *Ibid* p.163
- 7 1 Peter 5:2
- 8 1 Corinthians 1:27
- 9 Matthew 20:25-28
- 10 Isaiah 40:23
- 11 1 Corinthians 3:9
- 12 Matthew 8:9
- 13 Psalm 44:6-7
- 14 Job 38:19-20
- 15 Proverbs 16:9