

Distortions of Christian Leadership

A paper for the Wellington Theological Consortium, 16 August 2014

Presented by Dr Harold Hill

Thank you, members of the Wellington Theological Consortium, for your invitation. I am honoured to appear on the same bill as my distinguished fellow-presenters. I suspect I may have drawn the short straw in being asked to speak about “*Distortions of Christian Leadership*” but I defer to Shakespeare’s practice of introducing a clown or fool between more serious scenes.

Firstly, all leadership may be distorted because leadership involves the exercise of power and, as Lord Acton so famously wrote, all power corrupts. Even nice people! Power is like steroids taken by an athlete; it may enhance performance in the short term but exacts a long term cost.

So is Christian leadership the same as any other kind of leadership or is there distinctively “Christian” stuff involved? And will there be some particularly Christian flavour to its distortion?

The standard analysis asks who benefits from power and who suffers from it, but I’ll take another tack. All leadership requires discernment, so I’ll invoke the process for discernment through **Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience**, known as the “Wesleyan quadrilateral” – Salvationists being Wesleyan. I acknowledge that for Anglicans the fourth element is not Experience but Episcopacy, which for Catholics is inseparable from Tradition anyway, but please bear with me. I’ll use the Wesleyan Quadrilateral simply as a framework upon which to hang some cautionary anecdotes. My examples will be drawn largely from the Salvation Army – I do not have the right to wash other peoples’ dirty linen in public – though I’m sure that those of you from other faith communities would have no difficulty in supplying your own stories. Alas, my illustrations are largely scuttlebutt – but I’m supposed to be describing the dark side and that would be unilluminating without illustrations!

From **Scripture** the first thing that comes to mind is *Servant Leadership* – leadership which *devolves* rather than *accrues* power. However, that is not mine to discuss today – except by implication in looking at its reverse image, which must be *bossy, controlling* leadership. The Lord warned the disciples against that kind of leadership as practised by the rulers of the nations, and St Peter urged Pastors not to “tyrannise over those committed to their care”.¹ And arrogance, or “being puffed up to judgement”, appears as one of the traps for young players in the episcopal game in 1st Timothy.² Leadership derived from any model other than Jesus is going to fall short. Should all leaders wear a wrist band inscribed with WWJD, and could we define distorted leadership as “that which Jesus would *not* do”?

Scriptural references to leadership also include St. Paul’s analyses of the various charismata given for the functioning of the Church. Paul uses more than one term for leadership. In Romans 12.8 he includes the gifting of the *proistamenos*, the one set over, presiding, giving the lead. Then in 1st Corinthians he mentions *kubernesis*, the skill exercised by the *kubernetes* – the helmsman or pilot. By these different words, did Paul mean two different things, as today we distinguish between governance and management? Probably not, but if he *was* actually thinking of different tasks, I guess to keep the nautical image, one could be that of determining the course, and the other of making it so.

¹ Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:3.

² 1 Timothy 3:6.

Thus the Salvation Army has a Territorial Commander, who is supposed to set the course, and a Chief Secretary, the 2 i/c, who is the executive officer. They're different jobs, requiring different gifts. In the Army we sometimes make someone a Chief Secretary because he's good at the nuts and bolts, and later promote him to be Territorial Commander because it's his turn, only to discover that he can't stop micro-managing. We had one here who couldn't make that transition. Elevated to Territorial Commander, he used to require carbon copies (which shows you this was a while ago) of all correspondence and then reportedly phoned his Heads of Departments in the middle of the night to critique what they'd written that day. My questionable analysis of Paul's vocabulary may thus throw Scriptural light on the relationship between governance and administration, suggesting that distortions of leadership occur when the qualities required for the one task are applied to the other.

Finally from Scripture we should note that leadership in apostolic times was not believed to be exercised by the human leaders alone. The Council of Jerusalem could confidently write that "It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." St Paul said which of his instructions to believers were from God (1 Cor. 7:10), which were merely his own view (1 Cor. 7:12, 25), and those on which he *thought* he had the mind of the Lord (1 Cor. 7:40). While we would hope that leadership decisions in any jurisdiction reflect the guidance of the Spirit, many of us have become wary of too explicit a claim that "God told me". Jim Jones was an extreme example but there is no lack of people who are sure they have a word from the Lord and their leadership can appear "distorted". (I must confess however that in my limited experience it was the occasional person whom I was supposed to be leading who insisted on giving me instructions from the Lord... My manipulation sensor alarm has usually gone off at such times.)

Now the second quadrant of the quadrilateral; Church **Tradition** as a source for Leadership discernment, and therefore as susceptible to distortion. We might assume that the test for leadership might be firstly whether or not it has accorded with our particular church tradition – whether episcopacy has been faithfully maintained, or the local congregation has been sufficiently independent, or the Orders and Regulations have been scrupulously adhered to, or whatever our denominational shibboleth might be. Within those parameters we might ask whether leaders' conduct has or has not deserved censure.

Are some polities more susceptible to being hi-jacked by the temptations of, for example, money, sex and power? From the quasi-military Salvationist tradition I could illustrate the readiness with which hierarchies become distorted – and indeed such structures offer special opportunities for the abuse of power. Hierarchies also tend to close ranks against whistle-blowers, as in the recent case of Paul Thistle, a Salvation Army officer doctor in Zimbabwe, who apparently asked too persistently about missing hospital donations and found his commission withdrawn, his job terminated after nearly twenty years at the hospital and he and his family given 48 hours to leave the country, with the acquiescence of his Canadian home territory.³ Furthermore, institutions are usually uncomfortable with their prophets – Amaziah, the priest who ran Amos out of Bethel, would have appreciated the perfectly reasonable Salvation Army regulation against "stirring up of discontent, resistance or rebellion against The Salvation Army, its principles and discipline and/or its duly appointed leaders".⁴ Of which I am in breach...

³ <http://www.newzimbabwe.com/news-10621-Protests+doctor+fnds+new+job,+church/news.aspx>

⁴ *Orders and Regulations for Salvation Army Officers*, amendment 2014/IA/09, Volume 2, Part 7, Chapter 5 – Discipline – Section 3 (Breaches of Discipline) Para 11.

An early Salvationist saint, George Scott Railton, was ambivalent about the establishment of a hierarchy, particularly the appointment of Divisional Officers (creating episcopal oversight) in 1880. After a year he wrote that he'd been wrong and that the "officers and people evidently *love and delight in their Majors!*"⁵ Bramwell Booth had second thoughts. In 1894 he complained that "the [Divisional Officers] are often much more separate from their [Field Officers] than they ought to be. Class and caste grows with the growth of the military idea. Needs watching."⁶ Thirty years later he was still watching, concerned that Divisional and Territorial leaders "are open to special dangers in that they rise and grow powerful and sink into a kind of opulence..."⁷ *Opulence?* Perhaps a premonition of Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst, the so-called Bishop of Bling. But alas, we even get opulent lieutenants today.

Worse, another ninety years on, the editor of an international blog site for former Salvation Army officers writes that, "Hardly a week goes by when I don't receive an email detailing the rudeness and disrespect junior ... officers and 'formers' have experienced at the hands of their superior ... officers."⁸ That he taps into a disaffected constituency is an explanation, but not an answer.

Finally on authoritarian leadership, it works best if those making decisions are at least competent. William Booth, the supreme pragmatist, believed that was its chief virtue. "To rise in the Army, a soldier has only to prove himself proportionately good and able... It is really the administration of government by the wisest and best."⁹ If only... Sadly, incompetent, dysfunctional leadership – at any level, but especially the local – has probably inflicted its greatest defeats on Booth's Army, while the soldiers, as Lenin put it, have "voted with their feet".

But I don't want to go there, because there is mud at the bottom of every fox-hole. Some polities seem to give more scope for arbitrary rule and others for the gathering of consensus and exercise of collaborative or participatory government, and these suit particular personality types and management styles. They do not in themselves determine whether or not leadership becomes distorted. Bullying is not the sole prerogative of senior rank: captains and lieutenants and those holding no rank other than that which is self-conferred, are equally adept. At last year's Religious History Conference Professor Lineham presented a salutary case study from the history of the Brethren Assemblies – whose leaders dispense altogether with the shadow of ranks and orders but nevertheless exercise the substance of power.

I have a friend, once a Salvation Army officer and now in his mid-80s about to retire after 50 years as a minister of the United Church of Canada. Of psycho-pathological leadership he observes that, "In hierarchical structures one might have to deal with middle management and those upward in the scale, [but] those of us who have worked in more congregational polities might also know a number who had weaselled themselves on to Church Boards and Councils." Believe me; his stories are even more hair-raising than mine!

All traditions try to structure the exercise of power in such a way as to best facilitate its use while minimising its abuse. The ideal is summed up by Hans-Ruedi Weber: "Jesus

⁵ Quoted by Victor Doughty in *The Officer* (August 1974) 345-6.

⁶ W. Bramwell Booth, letter of October 1894, in Catherine Bramwell Booth, *Bramwell Booth* (London: Rich & Cowan, 1932) 218.

⁷ W. Bramwell Booth, letter to his wife, 27 April 1924, in Catherine Bramwell Booth, *Bramwell Booth*, 437.

⁸ Sven Ljungholm on Former Salvation Army Officers', <http://fsaof.blogspot.co.nz/>, 6 June 2014.

⁹ *Orders and Regulations for Field Officers* (London: The Salvation Army, 1886) 163.

transforms the love of power into the power of love”.¹⁰ If the love of power reverses that equation, the fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, or in our orders, but in ourselves...

So, Scripture can be ignored or misinterpreted; Tradition may be hi-jacked or it can ensure that our mistakes become irreversible; so what about **Reason**? Wesley believed that the faith must be open to rational defence and accountable to common sense. Can we exercise Christian leadership dispassionately, without invoking spiritual sanctions, unrestricted by traditional guidelines and uncoloured by personal experience? Perhaps Reason may be sought amongst secular leadership theories, of which there is a huge literature. All I can attempt is to pick some low-hanging fruit and try to discern its relevance.

While Servant Leadership has been part of the Church’s DNA since the Last Supper, it appears that secular leadership theorists in the twentieth century, in particular Robert Greenleaf, have brought it back to centre-stage for the Church – or at least to my small corner of it with the publication of *Servants Together* in 2002.¹¹

The American business pundit Jim Collins argues that the key ingredient allowing a company to become great is having as leader “an executive in whom genuine personal humility blends with intense professional will.”¹² For such a leader the “work”, the success of the mission, is the main thing, more important than his personal career. By way of contrast, there once came across my desk the final report on a course undertaken by an officer. There was a section where the supervisor had had to fill in several of those “on a scale of one to 10, the highest being 10” responses. For the “candidate’s empathy with clients”, a 2 had been circled, but the candidate’s own “awareness of opportunities for career advancement” had scored a 9. Fortunately he turned out better in practice!

They didn’t fit rear-view mirrors to ploughs in Jesus’ day. If they had, he might have mentioned the unwisdom, having put one’s hand to the plough, of constantly looking at one’s self in the mirror while ploughing. The opposite of Jim Collins’ humble leader who keeps the main thing the main thing is the narcissistic leader whose own advancement and success are the driving force, everything and everyone else merely serving as cannon-fodder.

Another contemporary guru is Daniel Goleman, originator of the concept of emotional intelligence, or EQ. His research shows that leaders’ EQ is twice as important as their cognitive skills for the success of commercial enterprises – a scientific measurement befitting the appeal to Reason. According to Goleman, the ingredients of EQ are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills.¹³ All of these, beginning with that self-awareness or *sōphronein* enjoined by St Paul in Romans 12:3, are Christian virtues highly desirable in

¹⁰ Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Power, Focus for a Biblical Theology* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1989) 167.

¹¹ See Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977). See also *Servants Together: Salvationist Perspectives on Ministry* (London: The Salvation Army, 2002). Unfortunately, the 2nd edition, 2008, played down the servanthood aspect; perhaps because a new General feared his predecessor had been a bit soft in that respect? For example, the phrase “participative leadership” was in every case replaced by “consultative leadership.”

¹² Jim Collins, “Level 5 Leadership: the Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve”, *Harvard Business Review*, July 2005, (<http://hbr.org/2005/07/level-5-leadership-the-triumph-of-humility-and-fierce-resolve/ar/1>).

¹³ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ* (New York: Bantam Books, 1996); also “What Makes a Leader” in *Harvard Business Review*, November-December 1998.

leadership. Their absence makes more likely the abuse of power and the distortion of Christian leadership.

Indeed, what strikes me about these secular theories of leadership is how often they find their genesis in Christian principles, how often their ideals are commensurate with Christian virtues, and how what they describe as bad leadership would appear in Christian terms to be “sinful”.

Does that raise the question of the delicate tension between personality and holiness in leadership? I once dismayed a colleague when she had suggested a certain officer as marked for high office in the Salvation Army, and I involuntarily blurted out, “Oh, no, he’s a psychopath!” (Being judgemental is one of my besetting sins...) It’s no wonder that psychiatrists get tetchy about the indiscriminate bandying about of such diagnoses by lay-persons; the vision conjured up is invariably that of a multiple chain-saw murderer.

Fortunately I can quote from TIME Magazine, whose pedigree as an authoritative source pre-dates even that of Wikipedia, that Psychopathy is a personality disorder “characterized by shallow emotions, stress tolerance, lack of empathy, cold-heartedness, lack of guilt, egocentricity, superficial character, manipulativeness irresponsibility, impulsivity and antisocial behaviors such as parasitic lifestyle and criminality.”¹⁴ (OK; perhaps I was wrong about that officer.) The article went on to explain that certain professions are more likely to attract candidates of this description. Although No 1 on the list was the generic CEO, the occupation of clergyperson still came in at number 8. How might being a clerical CEO, or church leader, compound the distortion?

Divested of their extreme negative connotations, some qualities apparently found in the psychopath may be essential to leadership, to the task of setting a vision, marshalling the troops, and maintaining the impetus required to achieve the corporate purpose. Great leaders are not uncommonly touched by the megalomania which found William Pitt the Elder exclaiming, “My Lord, I know that I can save this country, and that no one else can!”¹⁵ Or that led William Booth to write, “I am determined that evangelists in this mission *must hold my views and work on my lines!*”¹⁶ Distortion occurs when that passion for the goal over-rides respect in relationships.

If I have been obliged by my topic to speak largely of negativities, my only defence can be found in the Jungian concept of light and shadow. Recently a retired colleague was telling me of a difference of opinion he had with his mother when he was about 10 years of age. His mother said, “You’re stubborn.” “No,” he retorted, “I’m resolute!” “Remember,” replied his mother, “that your strengths are also your weaknesses.” The lady may never have heard of Jung but she knew perfectly well that our weaknesses represent the shadow side of our strengths, and she also knew that unless such weaknesses (whether of church leader or church polity) are brought to the light, identified and acknowledged and embraced, they will undermine and vitiate those strengths of which they are the shadow.

¹⁴ Eric Barker in *TIME*, 21 March 2014, http://time.com/32647/which-professions-have-the-most-psychopaths-the-fewest/?fb_action_ids=10151923619925836&fb_action_types=og.likes

¹⁵ Quoted by Winston Churchill, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (London: Cassell, 1957) 3, 125.

¹⁶ Catherine Bramwell Booth, *Bramwell Booth* (London: Rich & Cowan, 1933) 96.

So, having referred to Scripture, and Tradition, and made a long excursus around Reason, what about **Experience**? Bad experiences may be had in all faith traditions. The worst experiences may be had when religious sanctions are brought in to reinforce what are just bad management practices, the “spiritual” used to serve the “natural”; when the best of reasons are marshalled behind the least worthy of purposes, when the loyalty of the led is manipulated to the benefit of the leader, when mere moral blackmail becomes spiritual abuse. That’s probably the main way in which Christian leadership is capable of greater distortion than leadership in general. Religious leaders claim to speak for God.

I recall a Salvation Army leader speaking with a group of concerned Salvationists who wanted him to deal with a case of sexual abuse by an officer. There was, worse still, a non-Salvationist party, a counsellor from Rape Crisis, involved in the proceedings. The leader rebuked the concerned Salvationists (who included a retired Territorial Commander!) for their lack of loyalty to the Army in raising this matter. It was the lady from Rape Crisis who laughed in amazement at this distortion of leaderly authority!

But of course the Wesleyan “experience” in discernment does not mean just anything one happens to have experienced. It is about how the Spirit enables us to reflect upon and utilize our life experience in decision-making – like the Quakers’ Inner Light. Jackie Leach Scully, a Quaker and biomedical ethicist, speaks of “pay[ing] attention to intuition and gut feelings, not holding that they are always right but believing that they can be pointing towards something I’m aware of at some level but overlooking.”¹⁷ Of course our own experience may also set us up for mistakes. The Talmud allegedly says, “We don’t see the things the way they are. We see things the way WE are.” Scully goes on to say that she also seeks collective discernment for weightier matters.

The leader who committed the Salvation Army to a leading role in opposing homosexual law reform in New Zealand in 1985 believed, rightly or wrongly, that he was supported by Scripture, Tradition and Reason, but led by his inner convictions he rejected the collective counsel of all but one of his Heads of Departments here and the guidance of his international headquarters in London. Thirty years and several apologies later, we are still picking up the pieces. Leaders will consciously or unconsciously take cognizance of that intuition derived from their experience, but for that very reason must heed the scriptural injunction to “test every spirit” – including their own – by seeking and paying attention to wider discernment.

I have structured this paper on the Wesleyan quadrilateral and sought under Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience, to explore some of the ways in which leaders’ discernment – and consequently their leadership – might be distorted. But why the deplorable stories, which reflect no credit on the actors involved, or on me for telling them? Memories of good leadership naturally inspire and encourage us, but my bad memories have been offered intentionally. Both Christian individuals and Christian institutions might well emulate John Newton and hang that text over the mantelpiece, “Remember thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt and the Lord thy God redeemed thee...”¹⁸

One of John Baillie’s *Private Prayers* includes a confession which ends: “Use these memories, O God, to save me, and then forever blot them out.”¹⁹ Memories of distorted leadership may indeed help save us if we heed their warnings; but their blotting out had better be

¹⁷ “Back page interview”, *The Church Times*, 16 May 2014, 48.

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 15:15 AV.

¹⁹ John Baillie, *A Diary of Private Prayer* (London, Oxford University Press, [1936]1958) 35.

postponed to another world. We need to be reminded of our shadow, because it can help us to let go of the ways and works of pathological power, so as to do what Jesus would do.