

# LEADERSHIP IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

By Denny Gunderson

The age of modernism saw the full blossoming of a style of leadership that could best be described as the “imperial regime.” Its origin, at a historical level, began with the people of Israel in antiquity who clamored for a king. At a deeper level, the imperial regime has its origin in the egotistical hearts of all people. Modern man, resplendent in the authoritative robes of rationalism and science, has brought the myth of leader-as-hero to its zenith. Both management practices and communication principles have been labeled with the lofty designation *science*. No wonder then, that leaders are packaged as an amalgam of Hollywood superstar, condescending scientist, management *wunderkind*, and snake oil huckster.

How impudent it seems, therefore, when postmodernism raises its head and asks, “Yeah, but so what?” Momentarily fumbling behind the carefully crafted image of a demigod, the modern leader wrests from the leadership rabbit bag an avalanche of empirical data that verifies his/her royal right to be listed in the current leadership pantheon. To be sure, the response will be couched in appropriate good old boy modesty. Image must be perpetuated.

## Prophets, Priests, and Successful Businessmen

The church in America has not escaped the siren call of the imperial regime. Indeed, rather than being a countercultural movement, church leadership has been seduced and assimilated into the culture at large. The only delineating factor between church leadership and corporate leadership is the inclusion of religious jargon. Both share the rationalistic, scientific mindset of modernism, mixed with large doses of self-serving “do goodism.” Both also share a common messiah complex. As Robert Farrar Capon points out, “The Messiah whom Jesus’ contemporaries expected—and likewise any and all of the messiahs the world has looked to ever since . . . are like nothing so much as the religious version of ‘Santa Claus is coming to town.’”<sup>1</sup> Maybe it is time to ask, with Kierkegaard, “Do you not know that there comes a midnight hour when all must unmask?”

1. R. F. Capon, *The Parables of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 29.

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Stated briefly, modernism has told us that to be a good leader a person must possess requisite knowledge of basic management principles (often called *laws*), develop a compelling vision, acquire basic communication skills, and project all with calm self-assurance. These necessary ingredients have been formulized, then wrapped in the satiny sheen of anecdotal success stories and put on display for all to marvel. Leadership gaffs are relegated to the category "failed to read instructions." Or, if in an evangelical setting, failure is qualified by something called "God's will." In other words, knowledge alone, whether spiritual or "secular," is the basis of the success or failure of a leader within a modernist framework. The proliferation of how-to books in the management section of our bookstores stand as testimony to this fact.

The postmodernist wants to make several points about these assumptions. First, it really is not that simple. Second, it is dishonest to highlight only the apparent successes. Third, the ideals promulgated by modernist theorists have not produced a single utopia anywhere. And finally, why do those leaders armed with an arsenal of leadership data more often than not use their knowledge to either manipulate or dominate their followers? History shows this to be true whether one is referring to governments, businesses, or religious systems. In short, the postmodern individual is rightfully skeptical about any so-called science of leadership.

But if postmodernism is not really a movement but more a way of asking questions, does it have anything productive to say about leadership, or can it only ask questions? Furthermore, if the current incarnation of postmodernism is defined in its popular form only by the likes of MTV, grunge musicians, or anarchist, relativistic hysteria, why even bother with the questions?

These, and a host of other foundational questions must be asked. But while postmodernism may not always posit substantive answers, its stinging critique of Western culture cannot be ignored by the church. To either ignore or ignorantly attack postmodernism is to distance the church even further from the realities of a contemporary society in which the church is called to be as salt and light. For this reason it is important to look again at leadership, not with eyes of arrogant scientism or triumphalistic theology, but with honesty and humility.

### Five Considerations for Leadership Thinking

Given some of the major characteristics of postmodernism as discussed elsewhere in this issue of *Mars Hill Review*, we can make at least an educated guess at what effective leadership in a postmodern world will need to look like. Beyond this speculative exercise, however, it is of critical importance for the Christian reader to discern whether or not these characteristics can fit into a biblical framework. The following then, are five major considerations which,

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when taken together, signal a paradigm shift in leadership thinking.

### *Local/Global Duality*

A generation of youth now exists in the Western world which understands that local realities cannot be divorced from those that are global. The micro and the macro must live in peaceful coexistence. "Think globally. Act locally" is more than a bumper sticker; it is a pervasive mentality which colors the thinking of an entire generation. The Internet is only the first, elemental step toward the global family. Leaders of the future will need to be comfortable with a global neighborhood or risk exile into irrelevance.

### *Multicultural*

There are no longer any homogeneous nations in the West. Numerous demographers predict that within twenty-five years the formerly dominant WASP culture will be nonexistent in the United States. The majority of youth in America today do not even know what a WASP is. Mixed marriages are not only common, they are a harbinger of a way of thinking in which differences are prized over cultural uniformity. To borrow a phrase from Christopher Lasch, the "pathology of domination" is repulsive to all but the fringes of Generation X. Authoritarian/hierarchical leadership styles will always exist in tiny pocket empires, but in terms of wide influence, future leaders will need to develop cross-culturally applicable sensitivity, skills, and strategies or they will be assigned to obsolescence.

### *Pluralistic*

The shock of seeing a mosque built next to a shopping mall or of hearing the customer service personnel at Sears speak with an Asian accent may still be an irritant to older generations, but the youth of today now accept these situations as the norm. While many Christians are scrambling to evaluate pluralism on theological or doctrinal grounds, the postmodernist refuses to evaluate it in terms of right or wrong. His attitude is simply, "Pluralism is here. Deal with it!" To deny pluralistic influence on any basis is to be threatened by it. To be effective in the future, leaders will need to focus on the opportunities pluralism affords rather than any perceived threats which it brings.

### *Wholistic*

Contrary to the belief found in some evangelical circles that wholistic thinking is a propaganda ploy of the New Age movement, this concept is a reaction to the dualism propounded by Enlightenment thinkers. According to theologian Stanley J. Grenz,

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the Enlightenment outlook often articulate a dualistic gospel. Their primary if not sole concern is that of saving "souls." They may entertain a secondary concern for "bodies," but they are convinced that the physical dimension of the human person has no external importance. . . . If we would minister in the postmodern context, however, we must realize that the next generation is increasingly interested in the human person as a unified whole.<sup>2</sup>

The postmodernist wants to clarify that in dealing with people, all relationships are important—relationship to others, to nature, to oneself, and to God. To denigrate any of these areas is to trivialize and diminish the image of God common to all persons.

*Situational*

Postmodernism has little interest in leadership styles as it refuses to stereotype what a leader should look like. Rather, it takes a pragmatic approach based upon what is effective and nonbiased for a given situation. Autocratic modes of leadership are challenged by postmodernism on the basis of stifling rigidity and therefore relegated to the Hitlerian scrap heap. Postmoderns want connection, mutuality, and sensitivity from their leaders. As professor Walter Brueggemann points out, "Governments and societies of domination go to great lengths to keep the numbness intact."<sup>3</sup> The postmodernist is weary of one-way edicts pouring from the mouths of leaders whose primary motive is the perpetuation of their own imperial standing.

At the risk of over-simplification a question needs to be asked: Does it not sound like the type of leadership required in a postmodern world is best fulfilled by the servant-leadership modeled by Jesus in the Gospels? In both his teaching and commission to the early apostles, the Bible shows that Jesus sent out teams of leaders: a) with diversity of giftedness, b) with a cross-cultural mandate, c) to Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth, d) to meet people relative to their needs, whether physical, social, emotional, or spiritual. Further, as implied by the term *servant-leader*, this required that the leader die to his own personal agenda in order to effectively serve others. In other words, the leadership of Jesus demonstrated all five of the characteristics needed in a postmodern world. This looks nothing like the imperial regime of the egotistical or culturally encapsulated. Paradoxically, it does have a direct correlation to the revelation of the true and proper rule and reign of God over his creation. Could it be that the church, if she will truly follow Jesus' example, is in a position to supply the type of leadership which the world now so desperately needs?

2. S. J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 171.
3. W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 86.



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