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## The theology of Public Leadership

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### Creation: why were we made?

A biblical perspective on leadership begins with the question of what it means to be a good human being. And Scripture's reflection on this question begins with creation, where the themes of human dignity, dignified work, creativity and companionship are developed. As public leadership puts us in relationship with other human beings, these ideas about what it means to be human in turn shape what it means to exercise public leadership. In Genesis chapter 1 we read:

*Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'*

*So God created humankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.*

*God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'*<sup>1</sup>

This passage first establishes human *dignity*: we are all made in the image of God. All human beings, regardless of birth, achievements or other factors, have an inalienable and God-given status, on which our ethics – and our reflection on leadership – must be built. And while subsequent reflections will draw out how humans live out this image-bearing in our various capacities, we should remember that these achievements do not *give* us all our dignity but presuppose it.

We read this text so often that we sometimes forget how radical it was in its original context. After all, in parallel Ancient Near Eastern texts, particularly from Egypt, only the rulers of the land were in the image of the gods. However, in the biblical account of creation all humans are given the equal dignity of being in God's image. There is no 'ruler class' or aristocracy that in some way possesses greater dignity and capacity to lead. Human dignity therefore transforms what it means to be a ruler, from someone who is fundamentally different from their "subjects", to someone whose role is to assist other people in a shared calling.

This point will be developed in biblical history. For example, in Deuteronomy 17, the King makes himself a copy of the Torah.<sup>2</sup> This is to show that he is not above, but equally subject to the law of God, which in fact places additional obligations upon him. Later, in the story of David, we see an all-too-human and fallible figure, in contrast to the 'god-kings' other nations credited themselves with. Public leaders are human, first and foremost, and leadership is set in the context of a shared relationship with God and a shared vulnerability to sin.

Secondly, Genesis 1 sets out human *responsibility* to 'rule over' and 'subdue' creation. However, human rule has often been described not as tyranny but as stewardship. This rule

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:26-28

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 17:14-20

over creation, which is the context into which all other human authority fits, is not absolute or separate from God. It is given to us by God and is dependent on him, and we are held to account by God for how we use it. This idea of 'rule' also puts us in an unbreakable relationship with the rest of creation: we are not above the world but dependent on it. It is our context, and our actions affect it. With this calling in mind, *escaping* the world to draw closer to God makes little sense. In this sense of being in an influential relationship with creation, and being placed within it with God's authority, all humans are leaders under God. This dignity and responsibility of human beings unite in a third theme: *dignified work*. What this looks like is set out in the rest of the creation narrative. After creating them in his image, God goes on to delegate tasks and authority to human beings. In Genesis 2:15 God puts Adam in the garden 'to work it and take care of it' – just as God had worked and ordered creation in chapter 1. Work is a sign of human authority over creation, and of our being made in the image of God that we do God's work after him.

Such reflection on the origin of work is not unique, but again Genesis takes a very different tone from the religious texts of other nations. The Atra-Hasis epic, for instance, was a Babylonian creation myth, which scholars sometimes compare with the Genesis account. Like Genesis, it contains an account of creation, and a reflection on work. However, it is work without the dignity and responsibility noted above. Rather than work as a dignified calling given by God, the Atra-Hasis epic depicts a revolt by the gods against onerous work. These gods cry out: "Let [the creator goddess] create, then, a human, a man/ Let him bear the yoke!/ Let him bear the yoke!/ Let man assume the drudgery of the god."

Without the dignity and responsibility described above, work becomes slavery rather than a gift. Humans are created by one of the gods not to lead, rule over or nurture creation, but to do the tedious work which the gods were unwilling to do. It is hard to see a consensual view of leadership, which values the dignity of those you lead and of the work you do, emerging from such a narrative. Instead, work becomes slavery which is imposed upon others, or which is escaped. The view of work in Atra-Hasis should have no place with readers of Genesis, which offers much more solid ground for Christian critiques of slavery and dehumanising work than the Babylonian story ever could.

Human *creativity* is a key part of what gives work its dignity, and we also find this in Genesis 1 and 2, as humans imitate God by creating things themselves. For example, in Genesis chapter 1 God names what he creates; in Genesis 2:19-20 God delegates this capacity too, for Adam to name all the creatures of the earth. The imitation is not exact, but human work and creativity is given dignity through its following in God's example.

Some have referred to imitation of God's creativity as *sub-creation* – J.R.R. Tolkien, for example, saw the creation of stories as imitation of God and living out his image in us. C. S. Lewis was more sceptical, and wanted a clearer distinction between human and divine creativity, arguing:

"'Creation' is applied to human authorship seems to me entirely misleading term. We rearrange elements He has provided. There is not a vestige of real creativity *de novo* in us. Try to imagine a new primary colour, a third sex, a fourth dimension, or even a monster which does not consist of bits and parts of existing animals stuck together. Nothing happens. And that surely is why our works (as you said) never mean to others quite what we intended: because we are recombining elements made by Him and already containing His meanings"<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Letters of C.S. Lewis (20 February 1943), p. 203.

This is clearly an important caveat. God creates out of nothing while humans order and change what God has already made – as with rule, creativity is not independence, as we remain utterly dependent on God our Creator.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, there are parallels in the Genesis text in which we imitate God, however imperfect our imitation may be.<sup>5</sup> Leadership often entails such creativity, whether it comes in solving a problem, setting out a vision, or designing something new. Such creativity which then influences others is part of what we were made to do.

This naming and creativity is itself part of a larger, more famous aspect of creation: that of *collaboration*. As Genesis 2 goes on:

*The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'*

*Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds in the sky and all the wild animals.*

*But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.*

*The man said,  
'This is now bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called "woman",  
for she was taken out of man.'*

*That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.<sup>6</sup>*

As many have noted, the first aspect of creation that is described as 'not good' is Adam being alone. God creates human beings for community, not individual contemplation. Men and women are created with equal dignity, male and female being in the image of God.<sup>7</sup> Human beings are given a calling, but this calling will only be fully achieved through collaboration. Again, influencing others, as well as shaping our world, are part of what it is to be human.

With the Fall, we see humanity's attempt to break out of this divinely ordained human calling, and to be 'like God'. This rebellion against God separates human beings from the one who gives us our calling, with disastrous consequences for each of these aspects of human life. The fundamental human calling is now fatally hindered by the frustration, sin and conflict of living in a fallen world. And point by point, the above gifts of human dignity are lost by human beings.

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<sup>4</sup> For more on this discussion of creativity in Christian history, see this article: [patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2017/09/human-beings-create/](https://patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2017/09/human-beings-create/).

<sup>5</sup> As an analogy, Jesus commands us to 'be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' in Matthew 5:48, in that we imitate him in his treatment of the just and the unjust, rather than in our ability to decide where it will rain on the earth.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 2:18-24

<sup>7</sup> The word 'helper' or "ezer" used of the woman does not detract from this but denotes cooperation in action – God himself is described as Israel's helper elsewhere in the Old Testament.

So collaboration collapses, as Adam and Eve turn against each other in Genesis 3, and as the first sin is followed by the first of many murders in Genesis 4. Human creativity in imitation of God gives way to creativity in opposition to God, with the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, again leading to the end of human collaboration. The loving presence of God changes to human flight (3:8-10), and God's words of 'my Spirit will not contend with humans forever,' (6:3). The work that was once rest and a blessing becomes futile and a curse (Genesis 3:17-19) – a struggle against an unwilling creation. And this recognition of brokenness is as important to a Christian account of public leadership as the original goodness of creation.

### Affirmation and Denial

Creation is the first area in which we encounter the two big temptations and obstacles to public leadership: to affirm the world as it is or to deny that it can be anything more. Historically some Christians have affirmed not just human capabilities but human social structures and situations as part of God's creation and good purposes. A superficial view of the creating work of God, for example, leads to affirming things not originally part of God's plan as 'given'. Such a misapprehension possibly lies behind this – now widely abandoned – verse of the famous hymn *All Things Bright and Beautiful*: 'The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, God made them high and lowly, And ordered their estate.' Affirming unequal arrangements fails to account for sin and its consequences that are clearly part of the Genesis account. This in turn stifles Christian efforts to show leadership, as God may call us precisely to challenge such structures.

However, Christians have also faced temptation to go the other way, and see physical reality and work as intrinsically bound up with evil – making leadership and influence in such a context meaningless. All through Christian history there have been those who have seen the human calling as escaping the body and the world. Less extreme forms exist today, which are cynical about Christian involvement in issues of justice or environmental concern, for example, as creation is seen as beyond redemption until God brings it to an end. This view fails to account for the biblical affirmation of creation's original goodness and the original human calling within it.

Against both of these distortions, real Christian faith affirms the goodness of creation and laments its fall into sin, longing to see it restored. The focus on the intrinsic dignity of human beings noted above has made Christians keen advocates for justice at home and abroad. Confronted with injustices such as modern slavery, violations of conscience and other human rights, Christians have rightly seen these as unacceptable to God, and denials of God's desire for each and every human being, which is to live dignified, creative and loving lives in community with others. Such an insight has inspired much evangelical public leadership, from Elizabeth Fry's prison reform, to Wilberforce's campaign against slavery, to modern campaigns for justice.

So while the Genesis account is not a 'leadership manual' in the traditional sense, it lays some foundational expectations about what it means to be human. As all leadership lessons must give some answer to this question, this description of humanity's original calling is foundational to all that follows. Christian service and influence must reflect the fact that every leader is made in the image of God, leading others made in the image of God. It arises from the recognition that human beings were created to shape their context through work and creativity. While the Fall frustrates this work, it is still part of the fundamental human calling. And this is a calling to be exercised in relationship with others. The rest of the Bible goes on to describe what living out this call looks like in a fallen world.

## Questions for discussion / reflection

- 1) What do you think it means today for work to have dignity? How does this relate to the biblical picture of work?
- 2) In what way does your leadership require you to show creativity?
- 3) What effect do the consequences of sin have on opportunities for public leadership today, particularly in the areas of dignity, responsibility, creativity and collaboration?
- 4) What examples can you name of the two temptations of 'affirming' or 'denying' creation in the Church today?

## Crisis: Where are we now?

The Creation account is followed by the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and by God's formation of the people of Israel and establishing them in the Promised Land. This narrative offers us a rich account of God's character and how he deals with his people faithfully. However, for public leadership there is a significant barrier between many Old Testament characters and us. Figures such as David, Solomon and Josiah operated as leaders in a context determined by God's law. It was not a 'shared' context like the one which we inhabit today, where we live alongside those of many different beliefs and worldviews, and in which our laws are not determined by biblical principles. A non-shared context is more akin to leadership within the church than outside it.

But in the sixth century BC the people of Judah found themselves taken into exile in Babylon. This was a cataclysmic change to Israel's understanding of being God's people. Formerly they were an independent nation, in which leadership roles were explicitly bound up with service to God. With the Exile, they began operating in a context where those in power have a completely different theological background and were not expected to change. The leaders of Israel became one voice among many and had to serve God in this new context. Appropriately, this imagery of exile is directly applied later by the New Testament authors to the situation of the church.<sup>8</sup> This makes reflection on exile most relevant for Christians in positions of leadership, as it accurately reflects the shared context of Christian public leaders today.

### Read Jeremiah 29:1-23

Paradigmatic for this life in exile is Jeremiah's famous letter in chapter 29. There Jeremiah writes to the first contingent of exiles sent to Babylon, giving them God's guidance for how they are to live in this new context. He begins:

*This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.'*<sup>9</sup>

First, the letter acknowledges the shared context and new situation of the Jews in exile in Babylon. However, it goes further than this by seeing this new context as part of God's plan. Far from the Exile being a sign of the triumph of Babylon and its gods over the God of Israel (which is almost certainly how King Nebuchadnezzar interpreted the event), Babylon is not even mentioned as an actor in this story. Instead *God* is the one who has carried the people into exile. Babylon is merely the context in which the people continue to serve their Lord.

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<sup>8</sup> While sometimes controversial, there is plenty of New Testament evidence for seeing some continuity between Old Testament exiles and New Testament church. 1 Peter opens by addressing 'God's elect exiles' and urges them in 2:11 to live 'as foreigners and exiles' in terms of their holiness in an unbelieving society. 1 Peter in particular picks up a number of the themes developed in Jeremiah 29. Elsewhere in the New Testament, Philippians gives us the concept of a heavenly citizenship as well as an earthly one, as Paul writes to the Church that is both 'in Christ' and 'in Philippi'. In a city that was proud of its colonial Roman status, Paul reminds the Church that 'our citizenship is in heaven'. Such a perspective relativises our earthly identity without obliterating it.

<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah 29:4-7



Nor is this service a merely theoretical or spiritual activity. Instead, it is carried out in being proactive in this new context, flourishing and seeking its peace (shalom) and prosperity. This passage in Jeremiah shows that God is bigger than the political fortunes of a nation and is big enough to be served by a people who are now one voice among many in a plural context. This assumption is a core part of exilic and post-exilic Old Testament books (such as Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and prophets such as Haggai and Zechariah).

The theological work done by the biblical writers on exile is foundational for Christian public leadership today. Like the Jews in exile, Christians are operating in a shared context, into which God has called us. To be strengthened for engaging with this context, we need to know that God is sovereign, and it is he who has put us where we are to serve him. We also need to recognise that God has put us in a particular context in order to shape it and be involved within it – as both Jeremiah’s command to settle down and the frequent New Testament exhortations for Christians to ‘do good’ make clear.<sup>10</sup>

### Isolation, Stagnation and Assimilation

In chapter 29, Jeremiah goes on to rebuke those who misinterpret the exile and the obligations that spring from it. As with creation, in this situation the twin temptations exist of affirming (and assimilating) or denying (through isolation or stagnation) the reality in front of us. Beginning with denial, the key temptation to which Jeremiah’s letter was a response was to isolation. This sprang from denying that God could have willed the current situation of his people or could want them to adapt within it. This is why Jeremiah is so emphatic about the people’s involvement in the place where God has brought them. In Jeremiah’s time there were prophets who continued to prophesy victory for the nation of Judah (this was before the total exile of the whole people). These prophets therefore saw this exile as a short-lived experience, and therefore as requiring no adaptation by God’s people. Jeremiah himself risked the charge of treason for going against these popular prophets in Judah, and they appear to have had their counterparts among the first exiles too.

Of them Jeremiah writes: ‘Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the Lord.’ Jeremiah goes on to prophesy the downfall of those who still remained in Jerusalem, and that the exile would in fact last for seventy years. And when the Jews did return from exile, it was to a much-diminished territory, and under the continuing influence of foreign rulers - so many of the characteristics of exile still held after the return.

It was therefore important for Jeremiah to warn the people against isolating themselves from their surroundings, on the assumption that this was the only way to maintain purity, or that deliverance would come soon. This temptation re-emerged for the New Testament church (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:9-11, 1 Thessalonians 3:11-12). It could be replicated today by those who put their hopes in a massive change in political circumstances for the Christian community, or indeed in the return of Christ, rather than taking initiative and acting for God now.

A subtler way of denying the reality of the situation in which God had led his people was *stagnation*. Rather than waiting for immediate deliverance or isolating themselves from the world, in this situation God’s people simply get nothing done, as a reaction against the difficulties of living in a shared context. This is particularly evident after the return from Exile, when God’s people seek to rebuild the temple. In the book of Ezra, we read that in response to criticism and persecution, work on rebuilding the temple was suspended. Ezra 4:4-5 notes that ‘The peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them

<sup>10</sup> See for example: Matthew 5:13-16; 1 Peter 2:13-17.

afraid to go on building. They bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia.’ This stagnation is another form of the denial or isolation mentioned above. The temple was a public project, which meant that the Israelites had to take the risk of operating in a shared context, in the face of hostility.<sup>11</sup> In response to opposition, they concluded, implicitly, that God’s will could not be achieved in such a context: the task was too hard, much harder than the one Solomon had when he built the first temple, at a time when Israel was at the height of its power! Instead, Haggai tells us that the people turned to improving their own private homes, which no-one opposed. In response to this comes the hard preaching of Zechariah and Haggai, with Haggai asking: ‘Is it time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house [the Temple] remains a ruin?’<sup>12</sup> Against stagnation, God encourages his people (including leaders like Ezra, Nehemiah and Zerubbabel) to persist in the public work he has called them to do.

Biblical texts on the exile are also at pains to warn against assimilation – the affirmation-theology which was the opposite error of isolation while in exile. While assimilation is a less explicit threat in Jeremiah, we see this exilic temptation very clearly in the book of Daniel. At the heart of this book are a series of challenges to Daniel and his friends to compromise their devotion to God in the face of royal coercion. These stories are familiar to us: Daniel in the lion’s den, his friends in the fiery furnace. In each case, assimilation (often expressed through idolatry) is a key temptation.

However, resisting assimilation is only a struggle to people who are seeking to engage with the world rather than running away from it. The Book of Daniel also gives us cases where Daniel and his friends chose not to make something into a battle, refusing to isolate themselves or make themselves martyrs. For example, in the first chapter they learned the language and literature of the Chaldeans and served several non-Israelite rulers as key advisers. James K A Smith writes: “[Daniel’s] faithfulness did not find expression in an enclave of purity, nor did it require him to insulate himself in some holy huddle that protected him from compromise. Instead he was faithful amidst compromise.”<sup>13</sup> Daniel resists the temptation of isolation as well as that of assimilation.

The core lesson of this experience of God’s people in exile is that such a shared context does not frustrate the plan of God: it instead becomes the arena in which God’s plan is fulfilled. Both in the Exile and today, God’s people are to resist isolating ourselves from unbelieving contexts, instead looking for ways to shape them. We’re to be wary of the temptation to give up and encourage one another in our work. And we’re to develop a clear understanding of where we must not assimilate, and where we must obey God rather than human authority. The challenge of this shared context is the challenge to which Christian public leadership is the response.

### Questions for discussion / reflection

- 1) What difference does operating in a shared context alongside those of diverse views and backgrounds make to your style of leadership?
- 2) What impact does believing that God chose to put you in your particular context have on the way you see your leadership role?

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<sup>11</sup> In a similar context, Esther’s temptation is to fall silent, and not to use the opportunity she has to save her people. See especially Esther chapter 4.

<sup>12</sup> Haggai 1:1-4

<sup>13</sup> See the Evangelical Alliance’s *Change the World* course; week 3:

[changetheworld.thepublicleader.com](http://changetheworld.thepublicleader.com)



3) Can you give any examples of isolation, stagnation or assimilation among public leaders today?