

LED BY THE SPIRIT

By JOHN H. WRIGHT

LEADERSHIP in the christian community is radically a gift and work of the holy Spirit. Human wisdom, administrative skill, natural vitality, and attractive personality do not equip one to guide the Church, even though they can help in doing this. Official position itself does not make a person a leader; for it is not enough to make laws, interpret documents, and perform ritual. This is not to say that the hierarchic and the charismatic are in opposition to each other; for hierarchical offices are charisms, gifts of the Spirit for the guidance of the Church. But those who occupy these positions need to receive and exercise their charism as a gift, in conscious, prayerful dependence on the holy Spirit. They must not suppose that they have been enabled somehow to control the Spirit, and that their personal preferences automatically transmit his will for the Church.

Christ or the holy Spirit?

At the profoundest level christian leadership presents a problem whose resolution can cast light on the entire matter. This problem can be expressed in several ways: Is it Christ or the holy Spirit who is leader of the Church? If both are said to lead, is their leadership two or one?

Christ is clearly described as our leader. There can be no doubt of this. He invites all men to follow him, lays down conditions required for this,¹ and assures us that by doing so we will not walk in darkness.² He is called the good Shepherd,³ and the pioneer of our salvation.⁴ The captivity letters stress the theme of Christ's headship,⁵ the source of the unity and growth of the Body. Finally, Jesus is acclaimed as Lord,⁶ associated with the Father in the rule of all things. On the other hand, christians as the children of God are led by the Spirit.⁷ He enables them to acknowledge Jesus as Lord,⁸ and to call God Father.⁹ He leads them into all truth.¹⁰

Neat formulas are deceptive, but it seems true to say from the

¹ Mt 10, 38.

² Jn 8, 12.

³ Jn 10, 11.

⁴ Heb 2, 10.

⁵ Eph 4, 15; Col 2, 19.

⁶ Phil 2, 11; Rom 10, 9.

⁷ Rom 8, 14; Gal 5, 18.

⁸ 1 Cor 12, 3.

⁹ Rom 8, 16.

¹⁰ Jn 16, 13.

New Testament perspective that the holy Spirit is the supreme, transcendent principle of leadership, and that Jesus, filled with the holy Spirit and giver of the holy Spirit, is our supreme leader as a man active in history. As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus possesses the fulness of the Spirit without possibility of loss; as the glorified Lord, he communicates his Spirit to the world. He was conceived by the overshadowing of the Spirit.¹¹ At his baptism, the Spirit as a dove descended upon him.¹² Thereafter he is said to be filled with the Spirit and to be led by the Spirit.¹³ He came into Galilee in the power of the Spirit to begin his public ministry.¹⁴ In the synagogue of Nazareth he announced the fulfilment in himself of the prophecy of Isaiah, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord'.¹⁵ It belongs to him as the glorified redeemer, who has passed through death to triumph, to give the holy Spirit to those who believe in him.¹⁶ When he sent leaders to continue his own saving mission, he empowered them by breathing upon them and communicating the holy Spirit to them.¹⁷

We may say that every kind of leadership in the christian community is a sharing in the leadership of Christ by receiving from him the gift of the holy Spirit. The apostles are sent by Jesus Christ, and are filled with the Spirit.¹⁸ Paul tells the Corinthians to follow him as he follows Christ,¹⁹ and he is sent by the Spirit,²⁰ and filled with the Spirit.²¹ He exhorts the elders of the church of Ephesus, 'Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church of God which he obtained with his own blood'.²² Moreover, leadership in the Church is far broader than these official positions; each has received his own gift for the common good, and is called upon to share it with the others.²³ Each in his own degree is supposed to be a leader through following Christ and being faithful to the guidance of the Spirit received from Christ. There are, of course, positions of greater responsibility, requiring obedience from the others,²⁴ an obedience that is finally shown to the holy Spirit.²⁵

¹¹ Lk 1, 35.

¹² Mk 1, 10.

¹³ Lk 4, 1.

¹⁴ Lk 4, 14.

¹⁵ Lk 4, 18-20.

¹⁶ Jn 7, 39; Acts 2, 33.

¹⁷ Jn 20, 21-23.

¹⁸ Acts 2, 4.

¹⁹ 1 Cor 11, 1.

²⁰ Acts 13, 4.

²¹ Acts 13, 9.

²² Acts 20, 28.

²³ Rom 12, 6-8; 1 Cor 12, 7-11.

²⁴ Heb 13, 17.

²⁵ Acts 15, 28.

The leader and the goal: vision, dedication, confidence

Leadership, wherever it is found, involves two sets of relationships: one which orient the leader to the goal which he pursues, and one which unites him with those whom he leads. In the christian leader, both sets of relationships come from Christ, through gifts of the holy Spirit. Three gifts in particular relate the leader to the goal: the vision of faith, dedication or a love that subordinates all lesser values, and a firm confidence of overcoming all obstacles and reaching the end.

The vision of faith dispels the blindness that makes leadership impossible. Blindness in one who attempts to lead others drew sharp rebukes from Jesus. He saw this blindness in those who placed merely human traditions above the word of God, rendering void God's commands by subtle devices.²⁶ He compared those who decried the minor failings of others, while overlooking their own sins, to blind men attempting to lead other blind men, with the result that both fall into the pit.²⁷ Those who became preoccupied with peripheral points of law and neglected the major concerns of justice, mercy, and faith, he calls 'blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel'.²⁸ A guide must above all be one who sees, who is enlightened by the holy Spirit.²⁹ He must have the wisdom that comes from the holy Spirit and thus can judge all things according to the mind of Christ.³⁰ He does not then fail to interpret the signs of the times,³¹ nor does he confuse the essential meaning of the word of God with a particular cultural expression or theological explanation of it.³² Through this wisdom he can discern the will of God,³³ the genuine motion of the holy Spirit.³⁴

Besides having the vision and wisdom of the Spirit, the christian leader must be a person of immense love, which is the first of the fruits of the Spirit.³⁵ Without actually using the word love, St Paul describes how his own life was completely transformed by coming to know Christ. Everything that he previously valued became loss and refuse; his sole wish was to receive in faith God's justifying grace and to plunge his life into the sufferings, death, and resurrection of Jesus.³⁶ He did not consider that he had already reached

²⁶ Mt 15, 6. 14.²⁷ Lk 6, 39-42.²⁸ Mt 23, 23-24.²⁹ Jn 14, 26; 16, 13.³⁰ 1 Cor 2, 9-10. 16.³¹ Mt 16, 3.³² Cf Pope John's often cited words in his opening address to Vatican II: 'The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another'.³³ Col 1, 9.³⁴ 1 Jn 4, 1.³⁵ Gal 5, 22.³⁶ Cf Phil 3, 8-11.

perfection and the possession of glory, 'but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus'.³⁷ This is the love that transmutes the value of all things in the light of the supreme good of the goal. Everything else becomes of secondary account that we may share in the sufferings and the glorification of Jesus: '... the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that is to be revealed in us'.³⁸

The third gift of the Spirit that orients a leader to the goal is confidence not only in the worthwhileness of the undertaking, but in its final success. Without deep conviction in the face of all difficulties that the goal can be reached, there can be no leadership. The gospel according to John shows this conviction in Jesus when it gives his words, 'Have confidence, I have overcome the world'.³⁹ St Paul's unshakable confidence is recorded in the unforgettable lines that conclude the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans: 'I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord'.⁴⁰ Earlier he had explained the root of the confidence that enabled him not only to accept sufferings but even to rejoice in them: 'More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the holy Spirit which has been given to us';⁴¹ '... in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us'.⁴²

The leader and the led: teaching, inspiration, encouragement

Knowledge of the goal and of the way to reach it, dedication to the goal and to whatever leads to it, confidence in the final success of reaching the goal: these are relations to the goal that make for leadership; and in the christian community they are the gifts of the

³⁷ Phil 3, 13-14.

⁴⁰ Rom 8, 38-39.

³⁸ Rom 8, 16-18.

⁴¹ Rom 5, 3-5.

³⁹ Jn 16, 33.

⁴² Rom 8, 37.

Spirit of Jesus Christ. The relations of the leader to those who are led consist precisely in sharing these gifts with them through teaching, inspiration or persuasion, and encouragement respectively. Once again, this sharing is a work of the Spirit, and it results in the up-building and energizing of the community. St Paul writes to the church at Corinth that the Lord has given him authority 'for building up and not for tearing down'.⁴³ St John indicates that he proclaims the eternal life which he has seen and heard 'so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ'.⁴⁴ The letter to the Ephesians urges all 'to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace',⁴⁵ and indicates that the gifts given to each one are for 'the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ'.⁴⁶

The christian leader is supposed to be, like Christ, a light to the world.⁴⁷ The truth given to him by the holy Spirit is to be communicated to others by word and example.⁴⁸ Paul was able to claim in his farewell to the elders of the church of Ephesus that he had not shrunk 'from declaring to you the whole counsel of God'.⁴⁹ Peter was told that his faith was meant to strengthen others: 'Simon, Simon, behold Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren'.⁵⁰

One description of the christian teacher seems especially important for the Church today: 'Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old'.⁵¹ In the original context *new* and *old* refer to the messianic teaching of Jesus and the promises of the old covenant. But the principle continues to be significant: a teacher must draw upon the riches of earlier tradition and at the same time be in close touch with newer developments and insights, the unfolding of the inexhaustible power of God's word. It is for this reason that labels of 'conservative' and 'liberal' are fundamentally unsatisfactory; both tendencies must be at work in one who follows the guidance of the holy Spirit in leading the Church into all truth.

Communicating one's own dedication to the goal is basically a work of inspiration or persuasion through sharing the Spirit. The

⁴³ 2 Cor 13, 10.

⁴⁶ Eph 4, 12.

⁴⁹ Acts 20, 27.

⁴⁴ 1 Jn 1, 3.

⁴⁷ Mt 5, 14; cf Jn 8, 12.

⁵⁰ Lk 22, 31-32.

⁴⁵ Eph 4, 3.

⁴⁸ Mt 5, 19.

⁵¹ Mt 13, 52.

attractive power of God's purpose must be manifested to the community through the attitude of loving service in the leader. 'The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves'.⁵² Accepting grand, honorific titles (being called benefactors) is alien to this spirit of service. Christians should avoid titles like 'rabbi' and 'teacher'; even 'father' is out of place when it becomes an expression of honour rather than gratitude and affection.⁵³ Timothy, the leader of the community, is directed to treat older men and women as his father and mother, younger men and women as his brothers and sisters.⁵⁴

One figure of speech that captures this aspect of persuasion or inspiration is that of the good shepherd. Jesus described his own leadership in these terms. It is characterized by two qualities in particular: personal concern for the members of the community, and generous self-sacrifice. He knows his sheep and calls them by name.⁵⁵ He is not a hireling, working for money, but willingly lays down his life for them.⁵⁶ Peter warns his fellow elders, charged with the care of Christ's flock, not to tend it for shameful gain, but willingly and eagerly.⁵⁷

It is this example of loving service, of personal concern and generosity that more than anything else makes the presence of the holy Spirit visible in the leaders of the Church. John wrote that we know Christ's love because he laid down his life for us; he adds: 'and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren'.⁵⁸ It is by this example and not by domineering that a leader can guide the christian community to 'be servants of one another through love', which is the fulfilment of the whole law.⁵⁹ To place greater emphasis on written law than upon this unwritten law of the Spirit is to misunderstand the christian community almost completely. St Thomas observes that the saying of St Paul, 'the letter kills but the Spirit gives life',⁶⁰ holds even for the gospel, if this is considered just as a written norm of conduct. The essential law of the New Covenant, he adds, is the grace of the holy Spirit.⁶¹ St Paul gives the simple directive: 'Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ'.⁶²

This second area of christian leadership, wherein one communi-

⁵² Lk 22, 25-26.

⁵³ Cf Mt 23, 5-12.

⁵⁴ 1 Tim 5, 1-2.

⁵⁵ Jn 10, 3, 15.

⁵⁶ Jn 10, 12, 15.

⁵⁷ 1 Pet 5, 2.

⁵⁸ 1 Jn 3, 16.

⁵⁹ Gal 5, 13-14.

⁶⁰ 2 Cor 3, 6.

⁶¹ Cf *Summa Theologica*, 1-2ae, q 106, aa 1 & 2.

⁶² Gal 6, 2.

cates to others his own dedication and commitment, has no more important application than in guiding the worship of the community. A lifeless ritual kills. A ceremony that is merely mechanically perfect is a betrayal of the Spirit. The faith of the celebrant as he recalls the dying and rising of Jesus must come to authentic expression in the celebration of the 'mysteries of God',⁶³ or he has simply ceased to lead. He cannot find excuse in a sacramental theology of *ex opere operato* for failing to bring an intense and living faith to this worship ceremony. *Ex opere operato* guarantees the true expression of God's mercy in the rite, but not the christian response of faith which accepts that mercy and permits it to be effective in one's life. The faith of the leader should inspire and guide the faith of the community. Although this obligation falls primarily on the president of the assembly, still all who take part bear this responsibility for their brothers and sisters.

Finally, Jesus reminds us in matters of ritual observance, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath'.⁶⁴ While remaining fundamentally faithful to liturgical prescriptions, the christian leader should accommodate the rite to times and places and particular groups of worshippers, so that he may guide them to worship the Father in spirit and in truth. To make rubrical exactness, rather than genuine adoration, the supreme norm would be to introduce a new form of justification by the works of the law.

The third general area of the relationship of the leader to the christian community is that of encouragement, of inspiring confidence. This can be treated more briefly, but it is of critical importance. For no one will even attempt to move forward unless he has some firm hope of arriving. The leader, out of the resources of the confident assurance given him by the Spirit, must kindle the hope of the community. St Paul tells how he was comforted by God in the midst of great trials and afflictions; but he regarded this as a means of consoling and strengthening others in their sufferings.⁶⁵ His confidence in God enabled him to encourage the Philippians: 'I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ'.⁶⁶ The letter to the Hebrews provides some of the same inspiration: '... we feel sure of better things that belong to salvation. For God is not so unjust as to overlook your work and the love you showed for his sake in serving the

⁶³ 1 Cor 4, 1.

⁶⁴ Mk 2, 27.

⁶⁵ Cf 2 Cor 1, 3-7.

⁶⁶ Phil 1, 6.

saints, as you still do. And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness in realizing the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises'.⁶⁷

The confidence of the community has two aspects: confidence of ultimate success, and confidence in the leader. These two are closely linked. What more than anything else inspires the community to have confidence in the leader is his own transparency to the action of the Spirit, his own manifest confidence in the guidance of God, his own thoroughly unselfish love of God and neighbour. Here is the sure evidence that he is a follower of Jesus,⁶⁸ and that Jesus himself was sent by the Father.⁶⁹

There is one other important consideration for increasing the confidence of the community in their leaders: the willingness of these leaders to recognize and acknowledge their mistakes. No human being, even with the best of good will, can be always right. Our participation in the action of the holy Spirit is never entirely perfect. Paul could criticize Peter for obscuring the true meaning of Christ's work by compromising with the judaizing elements in the churches of Galatia.⁷⁰ Five of the seven letters to the Churches in the Apocalypse of John are calling upon the leaders and the communities to be converted and amend their ways.⁷¹ For the infallibility of the Church means only that her leaders will never solemnly or universally teach error and that the body of the faithful will never as a whole fail to profess the truth of the Gospel. It does not mean that every official leader is always right. When a person refuses to recognize his mistake even after it has become apparent to many others, his credibility in other matters too is weakened. On the other hand, when he himself takes the initiative in discovering and making clear his mistake, then his word on other matters is considerably strengthened. A guide will have few trusting followers if he persists in giving wrong directions because he feels he cannot back down. Indeed he deserves to hear from the Lord the strong condemnation, 'Blind guide!'

Christian leadership is thus a double openness: to God to receive from him the light, the dedication and the confidence that come from his love, poured forth in our hearts by the holy Spirit who is

⁶⁷ Heb 6, 9-12.

⁷⁰ Gal 2, 11-16.

⁶⁸ Jn 13, 35.

⁷¹ Apoc 2 & 3.

⁶⁹ Jn 17, 21.

given to us; and an openness to others, to share these same gifts unselfishly with them, so as to build up the Body of Christ and make abound the eternal life which the Father gives us in calling us and making us in very truth be his children. The christian leader through this double openness makes present the leadership of Jesus in the Church, led by his Spirit.

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