

# The wisdom of knowing nothing

## Pauline perspectives on leadership, ministry, and power

Christopher D. Marshall

**T**he subject of leadership attracts a good deal of attention these days, in secular and in Christian circles. It's not hard to feel cynical about all the leadership gurus whose books and seminars promote their keys to success. The assumption seems to be that leadership can be procured like any other commodity. Just pay the money and learn the routine, and you too can be a leader. As

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with so much in our technocratic and manipulative age, leadership gets reduced to image and technique.

Also of concern is the prevailing appetite for “strong” leaders, those who offer swift and clean solutions to popular grievances or collective neuroses. In a security-conscious age, leaders who blindly project strength as a virtue can be positively dangerous. Hitler, it is said, won democratic support because he got the trains to run on time.

So there is good reason to be cautious about the leadership craze. And yet experience shows that good leadership is vitally

important for most groups or communities, including the community of faith. Without competent leadership, groups tend to limp along, struggling for a sense of direction or motivation and easily distracted by trivial concerns. For intentional communities such as churches to flourish, effective leadership is critical.

Good leadership, however, is not only about having sound managerial skills or a commanding personal presence, helpful though these may be. Nor is it principally about the exercise of power and control. The heart of true leadership has to do with values and virtues. The best leaders—those who inspire others with the confidence to follow their lead—are ones who model or

embody in their own persons and practices the values and goals they want others to espouse. But leaders don't have to be super-human. In fact, awareness of one's own human fallibility and alertness to the dangers of self-deception are indispensable attributes in any trustworthy leader. Yet leaders still need to be a little further down the track than others in understanding and living out the larger vision of their community or group, albeit imperfectly. They need to walk the talk, not just talk the walk.

This modelling was undoubtedly one key to Paul's effectiveness in leadership. In a telling autobiographical passage at the beginning of 1 Corinthians (1:18–2:16), Paul reflects on the circumstances that accompanied the birth and development of the church in Corinth. He begins by underscoring the outrageous nature of the gospel he proclaimed to his hearers. "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. . . . For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1:18, 22-23). He then recounts how this scandalous message manifested itself empirically to the Corinthians in two main ways—in the way Paul conducted his ministry among them, and in the way God chose them, a motley bunch of nobodies devoid of any human claim to greatness, to be recipients of divine power and wisdom (1:26–2:5).

From this remarkable text, several lessons can be drawn about the nature of Christian ministry in general and the task of Christian leadership in particular. The first lesson has to do with the inappropriateness of self-reliance.

### **Radical dependency**

Paul was a man of immense ability, a constructive genius of massive proportions. After Jesus, he has been the single greatest influence on the life and thought of the Christian church, and through the church, on Western civilisation. Yet in spite of his tremendous intellect, his extensive education, his rich life experience, and his profound spiritual and mystical experiences, when Paul arrived in Corinth, he was overwhelmed with feelings of inadequacy and fear: "When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you

except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling” (2:2-3).

Paul’s anxiety was probably fuelled by a sense of the manifest oddities of the new Christian “philosophy” he was propounding. It centred on claims about its founder, a crucified Jewish carpenter, that were calculated to offend rather than attract people, especially those of Paul’s superior class and tastes. Paul realised that the educated elite in Corinth, who valued the pursuit of human wisdom above all else, would find his message utterly absurd. Paul anticipated ridicule and rejection, and it filled him with trepidation.

But he forged on, determining “to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” In other words, Paul chose to interpret his experience of rejection as an opportunity to participate in the suffering and rejection that Christ had experienced. Paul decided to rest his confidence, not in his own intellectual acumen, nor in his rhetorical skill, nor in the winsomeness of his own personality, but in what he calls “the wisdom of God” and

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the “power of God,” by which he means the capacity of the Christian gospel to confirm its own truthfulness through its impact on those who respond to it. “My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (2:4-5).

If someone of Paul’s stature felt nervous at the task God had given him, and in response consciously chose to repose his confidence not in himself but in the sustaining power and

Spirit of God, there is reassurance here for us all. Christian leaders are normally individuals of above-average gifts and abilities, often honed through years of seminary training. Yet even the most gifted and well-prepared leaders will struggle at times with feelings of inadequacy and discouragement. These feelings are no cause for alarm; the great apostle felt the same in Corinth. Self-assurance must give way to something deeper.

## Confidence in truth

The only reason Paul could rise above his fear and trembling in Corinth is because he really did believe that the message he proclaimed, absurd as it appeared, was true, an utterly reliable account of God's surprising work in recent events.

Running throughout the passage is a repeated emphasis on what God has done. God has destroyed the wisdom of the wise and thwarted the discernment of the discerning (1:19); God has "made foolish the wisdom of the world" (1:20) and saved those who believe (1:21); God has chosen to shame the wise and the strong, "to reduce to nothing things that are" (1:27-28); God has become the source of our life in Jesus Christ (1:30) and has demonstrated his Spirit and his power (2:4). Throughout, God is the active agent. God has done something extraordinary. God has played his trump card in the crucifixion of Jesus, and Paul sees his own role as simply bearing witness to what has happened, so that people encounter the power and truth of God, not the personality and persuasiveness of Paul.

This is the *raison d'être* of all Christian ministry. The Christian community exists to bear witness to the "word of the cross" and its radical implications for human experience. Part of the task of leadership is to help the community discover the most appropriate ways to do this in the particular social or cultural contexts it finds itself in. But there is no point even in attempting to do so if the message itself isn't true. Ultimately, the only thing Christians have to offer the world that is different from what anyone else can offer is the truth of the Christian story itself.

It is our stewardship of the Jesus story that differentiates the Christian church from all other groups in society. It is not our piety or our sincerity or our morality that distinguishes us—Christians have no monopoly on virtue! What sets us apart is the story we gather around, the story we tell and retell, the story from which we derive our identity and our values and our understanding of the world. And it would be a horrible mistake for us to do so if it were not a true story, *the* true story, a story that exposes the lies and deceptions and half-truths that human beings so often stake their lot on.

Of course, to speak of the Christian gospel as the true story, something that stands over against us and demands our response,

is extremely unfashionable in the contemporary world. The catchword of our day is that truth is entirely relative, something people must find or make for themselves. At the same time (and in contradiction to this), a pervasive scepticism is abroad in Western society about whether Christianity has any truth value at all. One critic has likened Christian theology to “searching in a dark cellar, at midnight, for a black cat, which isn’t there!”

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In face of such scepticism, the call to bear witness to Christ as the truth, the power, and the wisdom of God, as Paul does in 1 Corinthians, is arguably much harder for us than it was in his day. Or is it? The extraordinary nature of Paul’s language—his repeated contrast between the wisdom of the world and what he dares to call “the foolishness and weakness of God” (1:25)—suggests that Paul found his marketing job extremely difficult as well. Pondering why it was so difficult brings us to a third lesson.

### **Swimming upstream**

Paul’s unrelenting attack on human wisdom and his characterisation of the Christian message as foolishness have often been used in Christian circles to justify anti-intellectualism: “There’s no good trying to explain or defend Christianity philosophically, because it is ‘through the foolishness of preaching that God chooses to save the lost.’ So don’t think about it, just preach it!”

But this misunderstanding of Paul’s words conveniently spares us the hard work of disciplined thinking and open-minded dialogue with troublesome unbelievers. The reason why God’s wisdom deconstructs human wisdom is not because it by-passes the intellect or fails to make rational sense but because it subverts human pride and upends conventional values.

The élite in Corinth, both Jewish and Greek, were tempted to dismiss the gospel, not because it was philosophically incoherent, but because it asserted that God had acted in a way that no self-respecting god ought to act. According to Paul, instead of coming in a blaze of glory to accomplish the deliverance of the world,

God had demonstrated saving power in the impotent torments of a crucifixion victim, a man rejected by the religious establishment as a blasphemer and by the political establishment as a revolutionary upstart.

It is hard for us to appreciate the feelings of sheer disgust that crucifixion engendered in the ancient world. This severe penalty was reserved for the bastard scum of society. A source of unparalleled shame and pain, it was never mentioned in polite company. Reserved for criminals, rebels, and insubordinate slaves, it expressed the loathing that those in ruling circles felt toward those who committed acts of defiance. Such was the symbolic power of crucifixion that some Jews apparently concluded that those who died in this way had been finally repudiated by God as well as by the state (cf. Gal. 3:13).

In view of this repugnance for crucifixion, the Christian claim that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth the creator God had willingly submitted to death on a cross in order to liberate the world from the grip of evil constituted an absurdity precisely because it represented a total inversion of existing standards of greatness and power. In becoming the epitome of human weakness, in the last gasps of a torture victim finally expiring under duress, God has actually shown himself to be most strong. For the power of God is not finally the power of coercion but the power of sacrificial love, a love that endured the agonies of crucifixion without retaliation in order to restore humanity to wholeness.

All value systems that associate greatness with the power of coercion—be that power physical, intellectual, moral, military, or economic—are cut off at the knees by the story of the cross. They are deprived of that divine approval or self-evident validity they claim for themselves. For “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God” (1:27-28).

This claim has obvious implications for Christian ministry in the world. The apparent absurdity of the Christian story is no excuse for neglecting intellectual engagement with critics of the faith. Christian belief is by no means irrational or intellectually incoherent; that is not why Paul calls it foolish. It is foolish in the

eyes of the world because it gives a lie to human status systems based on strength, wealth, intellect, or class, and invites people to find God where one would least expect God to be found—among the dregs of society. It is not intellect that the gospel challenges, but intellectual arrogance. It is not the search for wisdom that it decries, but definitions of wisdom that mask human prejudice and egotism. It is not the power of reason that it condemns, but the use of reason to justify systems of domination and oppression. But to understand this truth, Paul insists, actually requires a special kind of insight, one enabled by the Holy Spirit. This is the fourth lesson to be learned.

### **Spiritual discernment**

At the beginning of our passage, Paul says that God has “destroyed the discernment of the discerning” (1:19), and at the end of the passage he states that it is only “those who are spiritual [who] discern all things” (2:15). In speaking of discernment, Paul is not thinking primarily of mystical or intuitive insight into divine mysteries, or of getting guidance for personal decision making. He is thinking more concretely of the ability to detect the work of God in the world, to discern where God is present in the mundane realities of everyday life. It was the lack of such discernment, Paul says, that led the rulers of this world to crucify the Lord of glory (2:8). And it is to enable true discernment that the Spirit of God has been given to the church (2:10-13).

How does the Spirit work? In what way does the Spirit help us discern God’s presence in the world? Spiritual discernment comes by working outward from the central reality of Christ crucified. Christian faith asserts that God is nowhere more truly God than in the dying of Jesus. In the cross, as the Gospel writers put it, the veil of the temple is torn in two, and God stands revealed. When, by God’s Spirit, we are able to recognise and embrace this fact, we are given, at the same time, a fundamental principle of spiritual discernment: God is always to be found at the extremities of human pain and need. God is to be found where worldly strength gives out; God is to be found among the nobodies of society; God’s presence is to be discerned where no self-respecting god would be caught dead, but where the God and Father of Jesus Christ chooses to make his home.

This is a truth of immense importance for pastoral ministry. When we encounter people in pain and despair, when we sit with those who struggle and fail, where sin and brokenness appear to have the final word, we can still have the confidence that somewhere, in the very depths of their turmoil, Christ's presence can be discerned, sharing their pain and offering them hope, if only they can receive it.

### **Conclusion**

Somebody once asked Mark Twain: "Mr. Twain, do you believe in infant baptism?" "Believe in it?" Twain retorted. "Hell, I've *seen* it!" The same applies to Christian leadership and to all forms of Christian ministry. It is not what we believe that counts but what people see that we believe. The calling of the Christian community is to visibly bear witness to the foolishness of the cross in all the ways it lives and acts and speaks in the world. The task of leadership is to encourage the community in this vocation, and to do so by example.

Like Paul, we as Christian leaders will place confidence not in our innate abilities or powers of persuasion but in the power and wisdom of God. We will dare to believe that the story of the cross is true, that the Christian gospel has unique power to uncover darkness, expose deception, and transform human lives. We will embrace a value system that runs counter to conventional standards of greatness, that contradicts worldly status systems and confronts human pride with the reality of a God who chooses what is weak and low and despised in the world's eyes to reveal himself most fully. Finally, we will recognise in God's *modus operandi* in the cross of Christ a principle for discerning God's ongoing involvement in human affairs, enabling us to discover God at the centre of human pain and sin, and empowering those overwhelmed by need to find Christ as friend and helper.

All this seems a daunting commission. But perhaps it is not really that tricky. In the end, the role of Christian leaders, as those caught up in the drama and mystery of God's saving work in the world, is simply to be true to themselves and to let God be God.

### **About the author**

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