The Journal of Dialogic Ethics: Interfaith and Interhuman Perspectives 2, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 156–170

Leading from the Middle

Calvin L. Troup

Abstract: Augustine's rhetoric and philosophy of communication is incarnational. This essay explores *praxis* (theory-informed action) implications of Augustine's incarnational commitments for leadership communication, which he locates within households and commonwealths or, as we might say, in communities. First, the essay establishes Augustine's incarnational grounds for leadership practices, including the necessary relationship between humility and dialogue in a triadic framework. Once grounded, the essay considers questions of communication practice according to three major coordinates: authority, confession, and community. Finally, the essay reflects on how Augustine's orientation of incarnational rhetoric and philosophy of communication invites us to "lead from the middle."

Keywords: Augustine; incarnation; leadership communication; dialogue; rhetoric

About 2,100 years ago, the Roman empire suffered from a leadership void. People equipped with the character, training, and experience to lead the ship of state opted out of government leadership. The public preferred rogue eloquence—fine-sounding words devoid of wisdom—that propelled and defended the eruption of mobs. As thoughtful public deliberation disappeared, sage leaders who professed wisdom through eloquence retreated into private lives to protect their families and fortunes from frivolous lawsuits in an increasingly litigious society. Cicero (1949) explains these conditions in *De inventione*, a work he wrote as a young man describing the decline of the Roman Republic. After a lifetime of leadership in the Roman Republic, he was proscribed (the government took his property and his head) as Imperial Rome emerged.

Perhaps every age bemoans a lack of leadership, which is easy to allege but difficult to prove. But Cicero provides helpful insights that link wisdom and eloquence, rhetoric and oratory to good leadership. He insists that good leadership *praxis* puts principles into practice. For Cicero, however, wisdom and eloquence are not sufficient. In the lost book *Hortensius*, he indicates that leadership, the work of the ideal orator, requires wisdom and eloquence with virtue (Augustine 2014). Virtuous leadership is a function of ethical communication practices; the wise

leader faithfully unites word and deed. Although unattainable, Cicero considers this a worthy end for leaders to pursue.

Augustine (354–430 AD) extends Cicero's (106–43 BC) commitments to rhetoric as ethical leadership practice. As Augustine served the emperor teaching rhetoric in the imperial city of Milan, the *Hortensius* sparked an unquenchable fire in him to acquire the kind of practical wisdom to which Cicero aspired. Augustine's pursuit of wisdom appears in the *Confessions.* He charts a path through the wisdom and knowledge of his world—from the Manicheans through academic skepticism to the Platonists—none of which approached Cicero's high standard. Only the Incarnation—the union of word and deed by Jesus Christ—could satisfy the expectation Cicero had set for Augustine (2014, III.iv.7, X.iv.6).

In *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine (1997) builds directly on Ciceronian coordinates and rationale for ethical rhetoric. Augustine favors wisdom over eloquence alone: "He who speaks eloquently is heard with pleasure; he who speaks wisely is heard with profit" (IV.v.8). Yet Augustine advocates the study of both, since silent wisdom is of little value:

> Who would dare to say that truth should stand in the person of its defenders unarmed against lying, so that they who wish to urge falsehoods may know how to make their listeners benevolent, or attentive, or docile in their presentation, while the defenders of truth are ignorant of that art? (IV.ii.3)

The rhetorical tradition we have been considering, sometimes called the school of civic rhetoric, includes Protagoras, Aristotle, and Isocrates in Greece; Cicero, Quintilian, and Augustine in Rome; and the medieval encyclopedists through Vico in the Italian Renaissance (Troup 2009, 242–43). The school of civic rhetoric is a shared rhetoric of the Greek *polis*, the Roman republican commonwealth, and ethical leadership communication that functions best within the sound of the human voice, a consideration impossible in any imperial realm (Guinness 2016, 58–59). A working definition attributable to the school of civic rhetoric illustrates a *praxis* approach to leadership as a teachable, practical art: rhetoric is the art of making wise choices about future courses of action, in contingent situations, based on probabilities, not certainties, to the greatest degree that the case will allow.

Substitute "leadership" for "rhetoric," and the fact that Cicero, Augustine, and others in the school of civic rhetoric equate the two becomes obvious. The practical art of rhetoric, according to the school of civic rhetoric, *is* leadership. Yet the correlations between leadership and rhetorical *praxis* are philosophical as well as definitional. Truth and wisdom guide ethical communication across the full spectrum of leadership, the purpose of which Augustine (1998) says in *City of God* is to coordinate social action. The human dynamics of coordinating social action through rhetoric and persuasion constitute the demands of leadership, in contrast with techniques of social control informed by mass psychologism that have been dominant since the early twentieth century (see Bernays 1928; Ewen 1996; Tye 1998). Since the turn of the twenty-first century, these techniques have only accelerated and been amplified by digital technologies, devices, and infrastructure.

To explore ways in which an approach to leadership today might be informed by an incarnational communication ethic, this essay first establishes Augustine's grounds for incarnational leadership, including the necessary relationship between humility and dialogue in a triadic framework. The grounds for "leading from the middle" open further questions of communication practices according to three major coordinates: authority, community, and confession. Finally, this study will reflect on how Augustine's orientation of incarnational rhetoric and philosophy of communication invites people in leadership roles to "lead from the middle."

Incarnational Rhetoric: Humility and Dialogue in a Triadic Framework

Augustine's conversion to Christianity offers an entry point for pursuit of Cicero's enigma—how to unite wisdom, eloquence, and virtue in practice—an ethical rhetoric and philosophy of communication. The solution is the Incarnation (Augustine 1997; 2014). The Incarnation solves the ethical dilemma posed by dominant mind-body dualisms in the thought systems of Augustine's day, announcing the mind and body as an integral whole and essentially good (see Augustine 1997, I.xxiv.25). Ultimately, the Incarnation presents the human person as a singular whole in whom heart, mind, soul, and strength are indivisible. The oneness of the incarnate person is manifested in resurrection. The person is not an embodied spirit. Therefore, the division of body and soul at death, which does violence to the human person, requires resurrection for human life (I.xix.18). Augustine (2014) goes on to build his entire rhetoric, epistemology, and hermeneutic on incarnational ground (X.iv.6, XI.ii.4). He recognizes the perfect union of good word (wisdom and eloquence) and good deed (virtue) in Jesus Christ (2014, X.xliii; 1997, I.xxxvi).

But the Incarnation introduces a virtue alien to the conventional rhetorical framework for leadership: humility. Humility has no place in Greco-Roman rhetoric or leadership. Why? Because humility is no virtue in Greco-Roman culture. As Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) explains about the Greco-Roman view, humility is associated with servitude and subjugation, not leadership. The Roman schools of rhetoric in which Augustine (2014) had first learned taught the conventional wisdom: lead by winning through artful eloquence without regard for truth or goodness (I.xviii.28–29). The ethic was formal and aesthetic, and the goal was conquest, not service. Therefore, an advocate could take pride in having a guilty client acquitted, if not an innocent opponent convicted (IV.ii.2).

The Incarnation is intrinsically humble. We see the simple logic of humility as told to children in the traditional story of the Nativity. Jesus is born into the world as a helpless baby, wrapped in cloth and laid in a manger. The conditions indicate the circumstantial humility abhorred by leaders in the Greco-Roman world. But Jesus did not merely find himself in humble circumstances. He humbled himself. In this second sense, humility radically alters the terms and conditions of leadership. The integral, virtuous union of word and deed as

leadership *praxis* is predicated by volitional (not circumstantial) humility. Augustine locates the entry into ethical rhetoric and wise leadership in a volitional humility essential to the Incarnation (Augustine 1997, I.xiv.13; Elshtain 2018, 50–51, 66; Troup 1999, 145–78). The humility of the Incarnation is stated succinctly in the Book of Philippians as follows:

> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5–8)[1]

The Incarnation teaches personal humility as a prime virtue. Jesus is not merely an object lesson or example. He exhibits and inhabits humility. Yes, God himself enters the field of human life, the essence of humility. Wisdom himself comes into the world in heart, soul, strength, and mind, speaking and acting as a fully human person. And he walks onto the scene as the humble teacher instructing, exhorting, correcting, and encouraging humility, particularly for leaders.

Jesus teaches humility in leadership directly. The one who would save his own life will lose it (Matthew 16:25). The first shall be last, and the last shall be first (Matthew 20:16). The one who would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave (Matthew 20:26). The word and deed, volitional humility of the Incarnation is taught through proclamation and the practice of washing the disciples' feet: the poignancy of the lesson appears in the disciples' objection not to the word but to the deed. Jesus demands that the lecture and the lessons be received wholeheartedly (John 13:1–20).

The teaching has been embraced by a school of leadership known as "servant leadership," first popularized through the work of Robert Greenleaf (2008). While the servant leadership moniker has become a Christian leadership commonplace, Greenleaf's articulation of servant leadership is not "religious" in the sense of requiring Christian belief for effective practice. But volitional humility incarnate is his cardinal virtue for leadership.

The Incarnation teaches humility as a predicate for good leadership. Classical virtue means fulfilling an ideal design, perfectly exemplifying the characteristics of a class, category, or species. Champion show animals are virtuous; they embody the standards of their respective breeds. Humility defines virtue for incarnational leadership. The standards call leaders to forge ordinary practices directed by humility, oriented by confession, and focused on neighbors, not self. With leadership *praxis* in mind, what might humility in incarnational leadership *live* like?

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[1] All scriptural quotations in this article are taken from the English Standard Version of the Bible.

That humility leads through the Incarnation remains paradoxical. The conventional wisdom today echoes Greco-Roman inclinations against humility: Humility is weakness. Leadership requires strength associated with pride. A low opinion of oneself disqualifies one from leadership. The circumstances of humility would seem to stifle agency, precluding action and making leadership impossible. The point here is not that incarnational leadership magically makes pride and humility synonymous. No, pride and humility are antithetical.

Yet Augustine (1997) maintains that through the Incarnation, God chose to inhabit the profound limits of human personhood—the uncreated being becoming creaturely (I.xiv). To embrace or incarnate the human condition indicates a humble valence, but the humility of the Incarnation is willful and active. Rather than disrupting action, humble volition serves as a robust motive for human agency in leadership that is antithetical to pride.

The pridefulness against which incarnational humility works is well defined by Jean Bethke Elshtain (2018). Reflecting on Augustine's work, she says that pridefulness "turns on the ground that we are the sole and only ground of our own being," including "the presumption that one can master knowledge and attain epistemic completeness and certainty through one's own unaided efforts . . . a refusal to recognize finitude itself, hence our own radical incompleteness" (51).

Augustine repeatedly attacks pride and embraces incarnate humility in the *Confessions*. He confronts pridefulness using a figure of thought called *aporia.* Through *aporia*, Augustine confounds us with questions he himself cannot answer to force the issue of human finitude. For example, amid an extended line of questioning on the nature of time, Augustine (2014) pauses to say:

> Behold how you have made my days old, and they pass away, but how I do not know. We talk of time and time, of times and times: "How long ago did he say this?" "How long ago did he do this?" "How long a time since I saw that?" "This syllable takes twice the time of that short simple syllable." We say these things, and we hear them, and we are understood, and we understand. They are most clear and most familiar, but again they are very obscure, and their solution is a new task. (XI.xxii.28)

After a number of pages of continuing questions, Augustine says, "How then do I know this, when I do not know what time is? Or perhaps I do not know how to express what I know? Woe is me, who do not even know what I do not know!" (XI.xxv.32).

Through *aporia*, Augustine (1997) consistently calls us to embrace humility and reject pride, because "[k]nowledge puffs up; but charity edifies" (II.xli.62). He takes his lead from the Incarnation itself. Jesus, always already equal with God, did not see equality with God as something to be grasped (Phillipians 2:6). And, radically, Augustine claims repeatedly that no position exists that could possibly place one person over another (1997, I.XXIII.xxiii; 1998, XIX.xv; 2014, XIII.xxiii).

Good leadership never grasps for equality or recognition. Although he was never self-seeking, Jesus never denied his deity. He received worship and exercised his power in service of others (never in service to self). Volitional

humility-in-practice meant dedicating himself to serving others wholeheartedly. The call to leadership is wholehearted service to others in love (Augustine 1998, XIX.xiv).

In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis ([1942] 2001b) develops the antitheses of humility by contrasting diabolical and incarnational humility. Diabolical humility tries to hold a low opinion of oneself, particularly one's gifts, abilities, and character, which invites a certain level of self-deception. The purpose of demonic humility is "keeping their minds endlessly revolving on themselves," but incarnational humility's purpose is to "turn the man's attention away from self to Him [God], and to the man's neighbours" (70–71). Lewis elaborates:

> The enemy wants to bring the man to a state of mind in which he could design the best cathedral in the world, and know it to be the best, and rejoice in the fact, without being any more (or less) or otherwise glad at having done it than he would be if it had been done by another. The enemy wants him, in the end, to be so free from any bias in his own favour that he can rejoice in his own talents as frankly and gratefully as in his neighbour's talents—or in a sunrise, an elephant, or a waterfall. (71)

Focus of attention, not self-deprecation, is pivotal to incarnate, volitional humility. "Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call 'humble' nowadays . . . always telling you that, of course, he is nobody," says Lewis ([1952] 2001a). Instead, he "will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all" (127).

And the Incarnation teaches precisely this sort of humility—acute self-awareness that propels service, not self-absorption. Jesus knows himself perfectly and never deprecates himself. He is unconcerned with himself. And he knows others perfectly: "He himself knew what was in man" (John 2:25). He claims deity and never denies his own power or position as the Son of God. And he acts accordingly in every circumstance.

Jesus maintains humility even when his deity becomes evident. He receives worship, which in Hebrew teaching would be blasphemous for any creature (John 9:38). Angels always reject worship, which is reserved for God alone. When the disciple Peter professes, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus affirms Peter's profession, blesses the disciples gathered with him, and asks them to tell no one this truth (Matthew 16:13–20).

Jesus acts decisively as a leader, but exclusively in the interests of God the Father and his neighbors, never in his own interests. Perhaps the most poignant examples of Christ's constant orientation come in the temptations of the wilderness and the garden. In the wilderness temptation, Satan tempts Jesus to abandon his devotion to God the Father and to serve himself. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is tempted to abandon the Father's will and to preserve his own life at the expense of all who would be saved through his sacrificial death. Only Jesus fulfills the two great commandments—to love God and neighbor—which is only accomplished by acting at his own expense. He dies not against his will but through the action of volitional humility.

G. K. Chesterton (1959) captures this antithetical form of humility as driving action: "A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth. . . . Nowadays the part of a man that a man does assert is exactly the part he ought not to assert—himself." The link to action follows: "The old humility made a man doubtful about his efforts, which might make him work harder. But the new humility makes a man doubtful about his aims, which will make him stop working altogether" (31–32).

Jesus leads through action in word and deed in both the wilderness and the garden. He conducts himself within dialogues that reveal volitional humility. In the wilderness he talks with Satan, a fallen creature, in the presence of God. In the garden he talks with God the Father in the presence of the disciples. These examples are repeated throughout the gospel narratives, in which the mutual presence of God and others is always assumed and regularly articulated. The prophets and apostles likewise assume the constant, simultaneous presence of God and neighbor as a present reality, not an abstract concept or idea in any hypothetical sense. The dialogue may engage God with neighbors present or in mind or engage neighbors with God present. Occasionally, the dialogue engages both together, as in public prayer or preaching.

The wilderness and the garden dialogues teach us a volitional humility manifested in a triadic, incarnate relationship between persons. As C. S. Peirce and Mikhail Bakhtin, among others, indicate, incarnate dialogue is triadic in nature and structure. Their accounts suggest that all human dialogue is triadic semiotically, assuming the presence of a "third" that conditions the conduct and contributes to the content of the conversation (Peirce 1931, 1.345–46; Bakhtin 1993, 125–26; Bakhtin [1990] 2014, 597–603).

The situation, direction, and action of triadic dialogue demonstrates the volitional humility of incarnational leadership. Jesus humbles himself by coming *down* to lead his people, working within a people whom he gathers around himself for their sakes. He takes on the ancient name Immanuel. In so doing, he locates all good human leadership in the middle of the people and in the middle of things.

Since God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we are reminded that alienation between God and humankind as well as alienation between people are horizontal chasms, not vertical ones. God has always been coming down, condescending to initiate personal relationship with his people in their community (Isaiah 57:15). The Incarnation is prefigured communally throughout the Exodus in the tabernacle in which *Yahweh* dwells, a tent placed amid the tents of his people throughout their wilderness wanderings (Numbers 2). And Jesus centers the eschatological dwelling of his people in the City of God around himself in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:1–4).

Incarnational leadership is necessarily humble leadership. The humility in view is volitional and is conducted within community through word and deed. Rather than a humility that expects leaders to hold a low opinion of themselves, the volitional humility taught by Jesus Christ is practiced through dedicated service to God and neighbor, without attention to oneself. The inattentiveness is self-denial, not in judgment of self but in a steady focus of attention elsewhere for the good of others (Luke 9:23). Augustine (1997) explains that he would never have

converted apart from this singular fact; the virtue of humility emerges through the Incarnation in accord with obedience to the two great commandments observed simultaneously without regard for reward or recognition of self (XXVI–XXVII). Under such conditions, leadership emerges to advance love and liberty in the middle of the people being led. The incarnational leader leads from the middle.

Humble Authority

Leading from the middle means working *under* authority. The Roman centurion from the gospel narrative explains this well when he sends attachés to Jesus asking him to heal a servant. Jesus says he will come to the centurion's home. But the centurion indicates that Jesus need only speak a word, not come in person, saying, "I too am a man set under authority" (Luke 7:8). Not only can the centurion direct soldiers or servants to accomplish certain purposes, but he is also always, to use Bakhtin's (1993) term, "answerable" (40). In other words, all human authority works within an *a priori* "ought."

Leading under authority means that all human leaders are ultimately answerable to someone other than themselves and should act accordingly. As Bakhtin (1993) explains, triadic dialogue describes answerability—leading under authority—as a *given*. The "third" present in the conduct of all human dialogue holds an active, authoritative role to which we are always appealing for judgment, relying on for judgment, or, perhaps, ignoring as though to avoid judgment (28, 37–38, 56). Triadic dialogue accounts for an authority structure within human language that results in answerability, to which leadership must respond. Authority is an intrinsic feature of human communication. Accordingly, virtue emerges directly within human action.

The answerability of authority puts leaders in and under authority simultaneously. Understood in this way, human authority functions within a humble ethic of action that is a linguistic given, not a human construct. The centurion recognizes Jesus' authority *and* identifies with Jesus as though working under authority is a commonplace. He assumes Jesus will understand, and Jesus commends the centurion for exercising exceptional faith.

Humble leadership recognizes that authority is given. Therefore, no one can take authority, and no one needs to claim authority. The reference point for human authority is never oneself. Instead, being under authority, to be received and ordered under role and responsibility, is a condition of leadership. What the centurion assumed about Jesus leading under given authority Jesus explicated when he said that he did nothing on his own authority, only that which God the Father willed him to do (John 12:14–15; 14:10).

Guiding, directing, assigning, delegating, and deciding can all be done under authority, but status subsides. Moses's assignment to future kings of Israel exemplifies humble authority that embraces leadership but forsakes status:

> And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the

> Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel. (Deuteronomy 17:18–20)

By contrast, attempts to establish, claim, or take authority make an authoritarian power move that departs from humble authority altogether. Authoritarian leadership defies the constraints essential to authority.

Humble authority acknowledges spatial and temporal limits of office and role. The limits constitute the boundaries within which leadership freely operates under authority. As Augustine (1998) describes in *City of God,* commonwealth emerges from humble household leadership in which the head of household is compelled by love to subordinate himself sacrificially to the needs of others (XIX.xvi). Humility is required if the house is to be ordered by love. But the authority is limited within the household. The household functions under the customary and legal authority of the commonwealth, an authority established by the alliance of households.

Office and role delimit humble authority, calling for leadership within a specific mission constrained by given conditions and circumstances. As a mentor under whom I served for a time often remarked, people love the cliché of "outside-the-box" thinking by leaders, when the stark reality is that the best leadership takes place "inside the box." Because human leadership is necessarily incarnate, the leader's limits must be included in the conditions and circumstances under which authority is exercised.

Under authority, a prime task of leadership is to frame the terms of discussion, of deliberation, and of decision contexts—the "box" in which creative, constructive initiatives and solutions can emerge. Leaders work in this way to shepherd communities, institutions, and organizations while remaining faithful to their respective missions. Humble authority does not engineer the leader's desired decision but the conditions for good decisions to emerge.

Beyond households, institutions, and organizations, humble authority builds commonwealth through concerted leadership. Commonwealth, as envisioned by Augustine (1998), must be carefully orchestrated by leaders working together, because contesting, demanding, or asserting authority confounds commonwealth (XIX.xvi).

Humble leaders work under and *from* authority. The focus of attention for such leaders shifts from authority and self to mission and the community. Working from authority frees leadership for humble service within households, institutions, organizations, and beyond for the good of their respective communities.

Humble Community

Leading from the middle means working with people and through people, not working around people. Community is a necessary condition for leadership, no

matter how community might differ from case to case. Remembering Augustine's definition of rhetoric as the coordination of social action, a gathering of persons predicates human leadership. As the patterns of Moses and Jesus suggest, incarnational humility precludes overlords, those who would lead as elites above the community (Matthew 20:25).

In *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1978) explains that the reality of community is humble. Idealism concerning community, what Bonhoeffer calls a "wish-dream" of community, makes the idealist an authoritarian overlord prone to dismantle the real community (26–27). Leaders are inclined to fall prey to arrogant idealism:

> God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God Himself accordingly. He stands adamant, a living reproach to all others in the circle of brethren. . . . So he becomes first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God, and finally an accuser of himself. (27–28)

Real communities inhabited by incarnate human beings shatter illusions and present the conditions under which only humble authority can sustain community life. To begin, community life is constituted within the limits of human finitude. Beyond basic finitude, Bonhoeffer (1978) forces us to accept the pervasive reality of willful sin and the presence of evil in ourselves, others, and our communities. The recognition of sin and evil should be an antidote to the twin arrogances of pietism and irreverence (26–27).

Humble leadership works to feed humility and starve arrogance in the community. Pride believes itself to be worthy of demanding and controlling community resources, but humble leaders quietly make resources scarce for those who cannot demonstrate humble service. Resources follow service—the exercise of formal and informal humble leadership—in a healthy community.

To lead humbly is to honor the willing offer of humble service. Volition cannot be required. As Martin Buber taught, many things essential to community cannot be mandated (Arnett 1986, 172–73). Unless voluntary, constructive acts turn toxic and stifle the community they would cultivate if offered freely. And in this sense, the health and strength of community leadership depends upon a coalition of the willing: people who will work together under authority and from authority for the good of a confessing community.

Humble Confession

Leading from the middle depends upon the act and regular practice of confession, a willing act of humility that occurs within community under and according to a given word now spoken or recalled. The maxim "actions speak louder than words" misses the reality that, for human beings, words predicate all meaningful, ethical acts. Word and deed are inextricably linked, even when twisted. Language animates human action in space and time, including the action of leadership. Our

words locate us in dialogue under authority and in community—the context for incarnational leadership.

The purpose of incarnational leadership is to work under authority to advance confessional content and community action through a mission grounded in that authority. The confessional word may be personally expressed but is never merely self-expression. Self-expression advances personal power without authority. To act under authority is humble, confessing that someone or something other than oneself provides the content of leadership.

Therefore, the humble confession of incarnate leadership listens first. Leaders listen for the given word of authority, learning the grounds and boundaries from which to lead. Confessional acts of leadership respond to the given word—a word of mission for the community, not for the leader. The leader engages the community in confession, understanding confession as the action through which the community responds and working under the same authority, word, and mission that calls for and compels leadership.

Os Guinness (2015) posits that the alternative to confession is hypocrisy:

> Open, voluntary confession is part and parcel of a strong and comprehensive view of truth, and therefore of realism and responsibility. Whatever we do and have done, whether right or wrong, is a matter of record and reality. Responsibly owning up to it therefore aligns us to reality and to truth in a way that liberates. And far from being weak or an act of surrender, confession is the expression of rare moral courage, for in confessing a person demonstrates the strength of character to go on record against himself or herself. (203, italics in the original)

Resonance between leaders and the community under given authority is the essence of leadership in good faith. Guinness continues, "When we confess, we face the truth, shoulder the responsibility for what we have done, and walk forward without the complicating clutter created by lies or the fear of exposure" (204). To listen to the word of authority and respond by confessing under authority in the community produces high-fidelity leadership—faithfulness in word and deed. The virtue of incarnate leadership is confessional action predicated by word so faithfully that word and deed are indistinguishable from one another in space and time. Thus, we can understand leadership under authority as responsive to confessional truth and as recognizing truth-in-action, an *alethaic* form of rhetoric marked by coherent truthfulness, faithfulness, and goodness (Troup and Christians 2014, 164–71). To lead with *alethaic* rhetoric is an exercise in building trust within the community. People can count on the leader in word and deed.

But faithfulness in word and deed never surpasses *proximate* fidelity. Human leaders work under conditions of finitude and failure. The limit conditions of human leadership are both internal and external. Internally, we are prone to errors in judgment, practical and moral. Externally, challenges in the world and life surpass human capacities and make every human leader inadequate. Proximate fidelity requires appropriate confession of inadequacies and infidelities as a function of leading under authority. Incarnational leadership confesses mistakes and sins against the mission and the community. Infidelities compromise

leadership, but confession can restore proximate fidelity—the confession of errors and a return from an error toward the goodness of the given word and mission of the community.

Bonhoeffer (1978) explains the value of confession for the community in his classic work *Life Together*: "In confession the break-through to community takes place" (112). What is not confessed leads to withdrawal, isolation, and "poisons the whole being of a person." But practicing confession of mistakes and sins in leadership is daunting:

> Confession in the presence of a brother is the profoundest kind of humiliation. It hurts, it cuts a man down, it is a dreadful blow to pride. To stand there before a brother as a sinner is an ignominy that is almost unbearable. . . . this humiliation is so hard we continually scheme to evade confessing to a brother. Our eyes are so blinded that they no longer see the promise and the glory in such abasement. (114)

The conventional wisdom that dissociates humility from leadership cannot countenance confession. To confess is a sign of weakness. Confessing mistakes, errors, and sins diminishes authority over others, pride of office, and power.

Pride takes responsibility by recognizing error and assigning blame. As Bonhoeffer (1978) observes of church leaders,

> A pastor should not complain about his congregation, certainly never to other people, but also not to God. A congregation [community] has not been entrusted to him in order that he should become its accuser before God and men. When a person becomes alienated from a Christian community in which he has been placed and begins to raise complaints about it, he had better examine himself first. (29–30)

As Bonhoeffer notes, evading confession leads people to place themselves over and to turn against legitimate authority and real communities. To mock authority and scoff at community is easy precisely because of the mistakes and failures of leadership. A critical spirit asks a question, but never an honest one. And the questions of attribution are poorly disguised, mere assertions in the form of unanswerable queries designed to trigger scripted accusations.

As a practice, to confess as a leader is difficult, particularly at the beginning. But proximate fidelity in leadership can only be accomplished as an established practice and habit of leadership. The difficult confessional practice of incarnational leadership repeatedly turns toward and returns to the given, authoritative word and the community under which it works, owning errors, mistakes, deceits, and sins. Unconcerned with their own voices, not speaking or acting for themselves, incarnate leaders do not degenerate into critique or advocacy but continue to engage and build through proclamation that can function in dialogue by virtue of the intrinsic humility of confession.

The proximate fidelity found through the practice of confession in incarnational leadership produces good fruit. Under authority and in community, incarnate leaders can ask honest questions, provide honest answers, and maintain openness without reacting or responding to criticism of their persons,

communities, or authority. Under authority and in community, incarnate leaders can define the terms of engagement and the boundary conditions for decision-making and direction. Under authority and in community, incarnate leaders can function as teachers, mediators, and moderators, engaged in confessional forms of listening, dialogue, and proclamation. Under authority and in community, incarnate leaders can initiate proximate practices and norms aligned with missional words and deeds, assessing their constructive merits from which good policies can emerge.

Conclusion: Leading from the Middle

Leading from the middle is the heart of incarnational leadership. Granted, most leaders in the world do not serve as chief executive officers, presidents, monarchs, or dictators, but that is not the point. Rather, authority situates every human leadership role "in the middle."

The concept that authority has no real existence, that authority can be reduced to just one more hegemonic structure, relies on a hermeneutic circle that ends up with leadership inescapably in the middle. If authority is a construct, then no one really has authority, only power that cannot be maintained. Michel Foucault (1980) taught this persuasively. In power relationships, right and wrong, good and evil, fidelity and infidelity are simple sentiments or diabolical fictions. Nevertheless, the death of the author and the eradication of any signifier associated with the crucifixion has been preferred to the Incarnation (Barthes 1977; Kristeva 1986, 226–27, 236).

But if authority exists, it belongs to no human leader as its master. Rather, it masters us all. We are all under authority. To lead well means first to acknowledge and identify the scope of our assignment under authority. We are in the middle to begin with. And second, we are in the middle of a community—because, as Augustine (1997; 1998; 2014) insisted, no human being stands above another in person. Authority is not, after all, a matter of age or beauty, height or weight, male or female, or of any ethnicity or skin color, but of role and responsibility within a living human community. In this sense, leadership is never status, only service within a mission—a duty station (Schultze 2005, 15). Leadership assignments and responsibilities vary from one station to another. None are simple, and all are important to the health and welfare of people and peoples. But both wisdom and observation insist that good leadership proceeds *in medias res*—in the middle of things.

Leadership from the middle is humble because it follows the Incarnation proper. It is humble because it is incarnate. It is humble because it is necessarily under authority, a word heard and confessed. It is further humble because it is confessional in and for a community. The humble confession of leadership proclaims a word of mission that builds up. It is constructive in word and deed, even when corrective, working to coordinate social action through wise choices about courses of action, not for self, but under authority for the confessional community.

Finally, incarnational leadership—humans leading one another from the middle—is proximate, because it is limited and lost, but it can be good when humble and confessional, because the Incarnation promises and delivers on true redemption, even through suffering.

Calvin L. Troup*, PhD, has served as President and Professor of Communication at Geneva College in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania since 2016. Previously he served as Director of the PhD program in the Department of Communication & Rhetorical Studies at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*

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