
THE INTEGRITY OF MINISTRY: COMMUNICATIVE THEOLOGY AND THE LEADERSHIP OF CONGREGATIONS

MICHAEL JINKINS

Abstract: According to law professor Stephen Carter, “Integrity...is a kind of wholeness, and most religions teach that God calls us to an undivided life in accordance with divine command.” If we are to possess integrity as congregational leaders—construing integrity as wholeness, congruence of act and faith, humility, purity of heart, and correspondence between our “private” and “public” selves—then we must engage in on-going theological reflection. A robust Christian doctrine of sin not only doubts the wisdom of entrusting a group’s fate to the unchecked will of a single leader, it also calls into question the *wisdom* of *seeking wisdom* in the mind of any lone individual. If our leadership is an expression of faith in the perceptions and hopes of others, if, indeed, our leadership is ultimately an expression of faith in the God whose knowledge and wisdom are beyond all human understanding, then our leadership is also an expression of trust in the collective wisdom of the congregation and considerable distrust of our own partial and flawed perceptions.

A Case in Point

The phone call came from an elder in the Canyon View Church.¹ She was active on her congregation’s governing board (being Presbyterian, it is called the session). She was deeply distressed. Her pastor had recently said to the governing board that the church was

Michael Jinkins is the academic dean and professor of pastoral theology at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas

¹ This vignette has been fictionalized both to emphasize the issues at stake and to protect the identity of the church and leaders, lay and ordained, involved. The author wishes to express his gratitude to David Forney and the peer reviewers who made a number of extremely helpful suggestions with reference to how the theme of integrity could extend throughout this essay.

suffering a crisis of leadership. He said this crisis was the result of his good ideas getting bogged down in the board. He said that the only way to get their church moving forward again, to get church attendance up, and to ensure the church's survival was to give him as pastor greater independent authority so his decisions on worship and other ministry programs didn't have to go through the usual process of deliberation in the board. The church, he said, needed a more entrepreneurial approach to pastoral leadership.

Some elders on the session immediately responded positively to the pastor's idea, noting that their own businesses could never have become successful if they had been subject to the kind of rigid deliberative processes that were the norm in the church. Leadership, they said, is all about strong, flexible, individual decision making, original thinking on the part of the chief executive officer, breaking old molds and "thinking outside of the box." The pastor, in their view, is the CEO of the congregation. Someone put the argument in theological terms: new wine invariably breaks brittle old wine skins.

Others on the board remained unconvinced and uneasy, however. The new organizational proposal the pastor was introducing sidelined not only the deliberative processes of the congregation's governing board, but (and this was rather ironic because of the pastor's continual critique of clericalism), the new process actually tended to severely limit the participation of lay persons, especially those who did not share his perspective, in all aspects of decision making and meaningful congregational leadership.

From the perspective of the elder who called me, the very integrity of ministry was at stake in this situation. She subsequently resigned from the board and moved her membership to another congregation. And, some months later, the regional judicatory for this church, after several complaints, conducted an investigation into the church's leadership.

The Meaning of Integrity

Let's begin our inquiry by considering the elder's concern that the integrity of ministry is at stake in this situation. And let's begin by reflecting on the meaning of integrity.

According to law professor and author Stephen Carter: "The word *integrity* comes from the same Latin root as *integer* and historically has been understood to carry much the same sense, the sense of *wholeness*: a person of integrity, like a whole number, is a whole person, a person somehow undivided."² Integrity conveys a sense of personal congruence: a person of integrity is toward others as that person is in him or herself; a person of integrity lives in a manner consistent with his or her espoused values. Carter continues: "The concept we are calling integrity has had little attention from philosophers, but has long been a central concern to the religions. Integrity...is a kind of wholeness, and most religions teach that God calls us to an undivided life in accordance with divine command."³

Christian theology has tended to view the quality or characteristic we indicate with the word *integrity* as an essential attribute of God (though Christian theology does not tend to use the term itself in theological discourse) and has understood this quality to be a core ethical obligation of humanity as created in the image of God. In various strands of Christian theology God's integrity is expressed by ideas such as: *God is in Godself who God is toward us*, and *God's being and God's actions are congruent*.⁴ These theological beliefs correspond to ethical

² Stephen L. Carter, *Integrity* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 7.

³ Carter, 8.

⁴ The reflections of two twentieth-century theologians illuminate these two aspects of the integrity of God especially well: T. F. Torrance's study of Nicene orthodoxy, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), brilliantly articulates the first of these two aspects of God's integrity, especially in chapter 2, "Access to the Father," pp. 47-75, and chapter 4, "God of God, Light of Light," pp. 110-145, while Karl Barth often reflected on the second aspect of God's integrity, for example, in *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G. W.

commitments, as in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's statement from a Nazi jail: "The church is the church only when it exists for others," and in Søren Kierkegaard's observation that "purity of heart is to will one thing."⁵

When it comes to Christian ministry, one may be said to have integrity when one acts in a manner congruent with one's faith and beliefs in a manner consistent with one's actions, in other words, when one lives in such a way as to reflect what Stephen Carter described as "wholeness." Integrity implies that we do not live our lives in compartmentalized silos, but that our Sunday-selves, and the various commitments and values we espouse in the context of worship, correspond to our weekday and weeknight activities. Integrity is, then, an essentially communal quality of being. The person we are in ourselves is identical to the person we are in relationship with others. It is precisely here that we meet a fundamental challenge of congregational leadership: The integrity of our ministry emerges from the negotiation of our lives together as persons, as leaders and as followers, striving to discern how we give expression to our identities, forge our common life, and advance the church's mission amid the vagaries of human existence, the varieties of religious experiences, beliefs, and values among us, and in the face of an ever-changing social environment and the pressures to marginalize faith commitments as merely private matters.

Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), I.1.125ff., and *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), IV.1. 3-21. Of particular interest in reference to Barth's exploration of this aspect of God's integrity, see: Eberhard Jungel, *Gottes Sein Ist Im Werden* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr/ Paul Siebeck, 1986).

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, enlarged edition, 1971), 382; and Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing*, trans. Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper & Row, 1948).

Thomas Merton once wrote, “Humility consists in being precisely the person you actually are before God.”⁶ John T. McNeill observed a similar perspective in the writings of John Calvin. He explained that Calvin “sees God’s hand in all historical events, and never doubts that in our personal affairs and choices we have ‘dealings with God’ all the days of our life (‘in tota vita negotium cum Deo’).”⁷ Christian leadership, one might well say, is a form of discipleship, a particular expression of our vocation to follow God through Jesus Christ amid the challenges of human existence. Obviously, this is easier said than done.

Theological Reflection for the Practice of Congregational Leadership

If we are to possess integrity as congregational leaders—construing integrity as wholeness, congruence of act and faith, humility, purity of heart, and correspondence between our “private” and “public” selves—then we must engage in on-going theological reflection, and this theological reflection must occur at ground level, not somewhere in the stratosphere of abstraction. In other words, our theological reflection must qualitatively reflect the reality of the lives we live and must not shrink from engaging consciously and as faithfully as possible the tectonic stress points that test our integrity. In my view, an approach to theological reflection particularly well suited to congregational leadership is what Rowan Williams has described as “communicative theology.”

According to Williams, this approach to theological reflection bears “witness to the gospel’s capacity for being at home in more than one cultural environment,” revealing the “confidence to believe that this gospel can be rediscovered at the end of a long and exotic detour

⁶ Thomas Merton, from *New Seeds of Contemplation*, quoted in *Through the Year with Thomas Merton*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Image/Doubleday, 1985), 83.

⁷ John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: On God and Political Duty* (Indianapolis/New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., revised ed. 1956), vii.

through strange idioms and structures of thought.” Williams calls this type of theology “communicative” because it is “a theology experimenting with the rhetoric of its uncommitted environment.”⁸

When we as Christians engage in theological reflection across such boundaries, we reflect an awareness that we live as human beings in what Paul Tillich described as a “boundary” or “border situation,” that is, existing as creatures and social beings, but also, as creatures and social beings transcending human existence, aware also that the church “stands at this border line” at “any and every place.”⁹

The approach to theological reflection designated by Williams as communicative is particularly fruitful given the fact that our identity as Christians is formed amid the complex interactions of human social and cultural engagement, in relationships across all sorts of boundaries. As Kathryn Tanner observes in her study, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, “different ways of life take over quite a bit of cultural material from one another.” Thus “[a] Christian way of life is... essentially parasitic; it has to establish relations with other ways of life, it has to take from them, in order to be one itself...Christian practices are always the practices of others made odd.”¹⁰ To say much the same thing, though

⁸ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), xiv.

⁹ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 195-202. Karl Barth expressed the same essential condition in his lectures in Bonn just after World War II. “Heaven,” he wrote, “is the creation inconceivable to man, earth the creation conceivable to him. He himself is the creature on the boundary between heaven and earth. The ground between God and man is the meaning and the glory, the ground and the goal of heaven and earth and the whole creation.” “Man is the creature of the boundary between heaven and earth; he is on earth and under heaven.” Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 59, 63.

¹⁰ Tanner’s theological exploration of Christian identity and cultural boundaries is especially interesting. See: *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 104ff. The passages cited come from pp. 112-113.

perhaps more constructively, a communicative approach to theology looks to sources of wisdom beyond any single creedal community, even beyond all creeds, to a variety of persons and communities of discourse and values, to a multitude of disciplines and disciplinary perspectives, seeking to complement our partial knowledge as Christians and Christian theologians in the confidence that God is active in all of creation.

As a historical and practical theologian I have found this approach to theological reflection especially helpful for those of us who are active in leadership and in the study of leadership, not least because so many of the concepts and theoretical models with which we deal are derived from the worlds of business administration, economics, and political science. A communicative model of theological reflection provides support and critical facility for our life-long negotiation between the pragmatism of organizational leadership and the confessional commitments at the heart of the Christian community's identity, in other words, our struggle to maintain *integrity* as leaders and persons of faith.

To understand better how one might engage in a "communicative" approach to theological reflection on the Christian practice of congregational leadership and to discern the benefits of this kind of theological reflection, we need to actually engage in it. Therefore, I would like to return to our case in point, the situation involving the minister who says he wants to make his congregation more responsive to the fast-changing environment, and so recommends that the deliberative processes of the congregation be circumvented or removed altogether in favor of his own executive authority.¹¹

¹¹ I will leave to another context a reflection on the pastor's preference for an "entrepreneurial" model for pastoral leadership. This issue deserves careful theological analysis on its own because of the popularity of the model among many pastors in North America today. In due course I intend to inquire into the comparative adequacy of various "models of pastoral leadership," realizing that all such models (whether classical models such as "the pastor as shepherd" or models that have arisen in the recent past such as "the minister as salesman") are analogical and reflective of cultural contexts ("shepherding"

The elder who spoke with me was offended by the pastor's recommendations, but was unclear (even in herself) as to what precisely offended her. She sensed that something deeper than mere custom or even church polity was at stake for her, perhaps something theological. But she was unsure of what it was.

Her basic concern can, I think, be framed in ordinary parlance as a conflict between executive roles and deliberative processes in governance, a common point of tension in all modern liberal democracies wherein legislative bodies (parliaments and congresses) debate, deliberate on, and make our laws, while executives and the branches of government under their authority (prime ministers and presidents and the various administrations and agencies they lead) execute laws. There is, of course, a vast theoretical literature describing various aspects of this essential tension. Many of the most vigorous minds of the past two centuries have contributed to this literature, including, for example, John Stuart Mill, Isaiah Berlin, John Kenneth Galbraith, Bernard Crick, John Gray, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and more recently Michael Ignatieff.

This theoretical literature, which touches on philosophical, sociological, historical, economic, and political studies, is profoundly (though sometimes tacitly) related to theological themes and insights. This is where communicative theological reflection is most valuable for us in the study of leadership. It is valuable for at least two reasons: (1) it recognizes that the distinction between "secular" and "sacred" is largely a matter of social convention but does not hold ontological status; all creation is God's creation, and all knowledge is valid whatever the source of that knowledge; and, thus, (2) this approach seeks to make explicit the theological

reflecting an agrarian society; "sales" and "entrepreneurship" both reflecting a consumerist culture and its "commodification of everything." The quoted phrase reflects the theme of *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture*, 5(2) (Summer 2003). Some models for pastoral leadership, I would argue, are more susceptible to reductionism than others.

assumptions implicit in many theoretical models which are current in the culture-at-large.¹²

Sin and the Single Decider

Let's bring our pastor and his situation back into the picture for just a moment so we can place his congregational leadership in theological communication. *What exactly is at stake in this pastor's desire to diminish or eliminate the role played by an ordered group in making decisions?* His concerns seem legitimate enough, at least to some of the elders on the congregation's governing board. The pastor says he wants the congregation to be better equipped to deal quickly and flexibly to the changes in their environment. No one can doubt that the world we live in is subject to rapid change. The committee structure used by the governing board of the church slows decision making. Deliberation is anything but quick. Consensus-building takes time. Getting an idea from the initial stages of brainstorming and imagination through to a plan's final approval by a board can take weeks, maybe months. *Why shouldn't the pastor be given greater, perhaps sole, control as "the decider" for the worship life and ministry programs of the congregation?*

When I posed this question to a colleague recently, his response was simple. Only someone utterly naïve about the nature of sin *or* a villain bent on institutional control could endorse the kind of leadership model this pastor is advocating. My colleague (an experienced pastor and seminary president) argued that any leader who wants to curtail or eliminate group deliberative processes either: (1) knowingly wants to get his own way, and therefore is trying to cut out as much resistance as possible; or

¹² See the following for a careful exploration of the theoretical understanding that underpins my reflections here: Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 1-12; Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power To Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 1-9; 99-128; Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), *passim*; Dale T. Irvin, *Christian Histories, Christian Traditioning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), 1-33, 100-122.

(2) lacks a robust doctrinal comprehension of human frailty and sinfulness. My colleague is, I think, right. In fact, virtually every major theoretical model of political leadership that touches on the tension between executive roles and deliberative processes deals in some way with the doctrine of sin, though few explicitly recognize this fact.

The classical Christian doctrine of sin, of course, (at least the understanding of sin that has dominated certain strains of Western Christianity beholden to Augustine's legacy, including the Lutheran and Calvinist communions) holds that humanity does not simply, from time to time, commit individual acts that are bad or injurious (sins), but that humanity is part of a creation that is fallen (sin). Humanity is caught in a web of sin that alienates us from ourselves and undercuts our relationships with others, in other words, that strikes at the heart of human integrity. This doctrinal tradition holds that our relative "independence" as persons has not only a positive side (exemplified in our capacity to take personal responsibility for our actions), but a negative side too (as "in-dependence," the tendency to try to live deluded lives without a consciousness of our utter dependence upon God and our interdependence as members of community).¹³ It holds that our natural self-concern, which is essential to human survival, can exhibit a self-destructive self-interestedness, even a narcissism and self-centeredness, in rejection of our being created in the image of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. This kind of self-concern violates God's original intention for us to live for other creatures.¹⁴ The doctrine of sin laments the

¹³ I am indebted for the expression of this perspective to Holmes Rolston, III, *John Calvin Versus the Westminster Confession* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1972).

¹⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar expresses this beautifully when he writes: "Herein lies the most unfathomable aspect of the Mystery of God: that what is absolutely primal is no statically self-contained and comprehensible reality, but one that exists solely in dispensing itself: a flowing wellspring with no holding-trough beneath it, an act of procreation with no seminal vesicle, with no organism at all to perform the act.... If this creation is attributed

tenacity of human arrogance and pride, greed, covetousness and lust, selfishness, sloth, gluttony, and envy because all of these expressions of sin undermine our ability to live in community, to live humanly as created in the image of God, to live, in other words, with integrity.¹⁵

The classical doctrine fosters a lively distrust of personal motivations that some would characterize as a pessimistic view of humanity. But the doctrine also encourages modesty and humility with regard to our capacity to do good, recognizing that we are often unaware of when we have acted wisely and well. In other words, while it is true that every good human act is inevitably infiltrated (if unconsciously) by sin, it is also true that some acts we thought less than ideal may have done some real good (an idea which should give every Christian leader some measure of comfort). Sin is, in other words, a web, or field, or matrix in which we exist and which makes it impossible to perceive the nature and significance of all our actions and motivations, rather than simply the name we give to individual bad things we do.

specifically to the Father, then that is because, within God, he is the Origin behind which nothing more can be sought. Because, again, the work of the Son and the Spirit in the world is aimed at bringing all things home to this ultimate Origin, which has infinite room for everything.... And because, finally, the human spirit finds no rest until it has pressed forward to the starting point of all being and all love.” *Credo: Meditations on the Apostles’ Creed* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 30, 32-33.

¹⁵ As Reinhold Niebuhr observed in his Gifford Lectures: “Man (*sic*) is an individual but he is not self-sufficing. The law of his nature is love, a harmonious relation of life to life in obedience to the divine centre and source of life. This law is violated when man seeks to make himself the centre and source of his own life. His sin is therefore spiritual and not carnal, though the infection of rebellion spreads from the spirit to the body and disturbs its harmonies also. Man is a sinner not because he is one limited individual within a whole but rather because he is betrayed by his very ability to survey the whole to imagine himself the whole.” *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941), Volume I. Human Nature, p. 17.

We are, in some sense, hidden from ourselves, alienated from our motives, and in need of something beyond our own perception to gain a true and authentic apprehension of who we are, what we are doing, why we are doing it, and the consequences of our actions. This doctrine of sin, therefore, holds that there are times when we must rely on others (others no less flawed in character and motives than ourselves) to help us perceive a fuller picture, correct our own partial understanding, distinguish the best among the possible courses of action before us, and forge a good decision. And this doctrine recognizes that there are instances when (and this is especially crucial for leadership) we simply do not have at our disposal a clear choice between good courses of action or between a good and a bad option, but must choose between the lesser of evils. Reinhold Niebuhr's "Christian Realism" responded to this aspect of the doctrine of sin, as do Michael Ignatieff's recent Gifford Lectures, written in response to the challenges confronting Western democracies in light of global terrorism.¹⁶

¹⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Scribners, 1932); Michael Ignatieff, *The Lesser Evil: Political Ethics in An Age of Terror* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Another aspect of this doctrine of sin turns on the concept of self-interest, underpinning an important principle of diplomacy, a principle espoused by founding fathers of the United States such as George Washington, who cautioned the idealistic, "We must take the passion of Men as Nature has given them," and (as Schlesinger comments on Washington) "What was true for men... was even more true for nations: no nation was to be trusted farther than it is bound by its interest." Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986), 75. In 1961 John Kenneth Galbraith applied a related insight also based on a realistic assessment of human nature to the world of finance criticizing the "dangerous cliché that in the financial world everything depends on confidence. One could better argue the importance of unremitting suspicion." Galbraith's comment was recently used by the editors of *The Economist* in their analysis of the case of New York financier, Bernard Madoff. Galbraith pointed out the "tendency" among many "to confuse good manner and good tailoring with integrity and intelligence." "The Madoff Affair: Dumb Money and Dull Diligence," *The Economist*, 389(8611) (December 20, 2008 – January 2, 2009): 17.

A robust Christian doctrine of sin as both a persistent condition of creation and a disposition of the human heart has extensively influenced the development of some of the most enduring and effective institutions of government in human history, including those forms of democracy that hold the powers of governance in tension, the so-called balance of powers, in separate executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The political doctrines that underpin the institutions of most Western liberal democracies enshrine a tenet derived directly from this Western doctrine of sin, i.e., a profound distrust of the unfettered power of an individual leader, a conviction that even the best of leaders will tend to become despots and tyrants if their interests are not held in check by laws and constitutionally regulated countervailing forces.

Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., articulates this political doctrine when he says: “Leaders have done vast harm to the world. They have also conferred vast benefit. But even ‘good’ leaders, ‘democratic’ leaders, must be regarded with mistrust.... Unquestioning submission corrupts leaders and demeans followers.... Irreverence irritates leaders but is their salvation.”¹⁷

Schlesinger, in perhaps his most important book, *The Vital Center*, explicitly acknowledged his indebtedness as a political thinker to the Christian doctrine of sin. He writes, reflecting on the misplaced optimism of liberal reformers in North America in the 1930s:

My generation had been brought up to regard human nature as benign and human progress as inevitable. The existing deficiencies of society, it was supposed, could be cured by education and by the improvement of social arrangements. Sin and evil were theological superstitions irrelevant to political analysis. But Hitler and Stalin had shown that evil was real enough and very likely lurked in all human hearts. Reinhold Niebuhr revived for my contemporaries the historic Christian insight into the mixed nature of human beings. Original sin

¹⁷ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History*, 435.

came to seem a powerful explanation for the anomalies of the human condition. Democracy had to take account of the human propensity for self-pride and self-delusion. The children of light had to learn to live with darkness. Recognition of human frailty offered democracy a more solid foundation than a belief in human perfectibility. 'Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible,' wrote Niebuhr; 'but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.'¹⁸

If there's anything we are missing in the overly optimistic and disastrously superficial approaches to organizational leadership today (and this includes congregational leadership and the leadership of schools), it is a healthy respect for sin, for its persistence and pervasiveness. Anyone who cares about the integrity of leadership must take seriously the need for societies, organizations, and congregations to maintain institutional safeguards to prevent an individual leader's abuse of power.

It is because some of the best political thinkers have had such a healthy respect for sin that we have at our disposal theoretical models of leadership that take seriously: (1) the positive role played by countervailing forces in society (espoused by economist John Kenneth Galbraith); (2) the indispensable and potentially positive functions of social conflict in the life of groups (as described by sociologist Lewis Coser); and (3) the vital role played by deliberative bodies both in balancing the exercise of executive power and in making good decisions (as seen in the work of journalist James Surowiecki). Very briefly, then, we will consider how these three theoretical models for leadership build on what is essentially a theological insight, and how we as theologians and church leaders can gain a deeper understanding of congregational leadership by communicating across these disciplinary boundaries.

¹⁸ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (New Brunswick: Transaction, original ed. 1949; with new introduction, 2007), xii-xiii.

We seek, in other words, the integrity of knowledge in our quest for the integrity of leadership.

The Role Played by Countervailing Forces in a Society

John Kenneth Galbraith articulates the concept of countervailing forces in his study, *The Anatomy of Power*.¹⁹ Like Reinhold Niebuhr, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and other leading thinkers of the mid-twentieth century (a generation chastened by the catastrophic consequences of economic depression, two world wars, and the near victory of totalitarianism in Europe), Galbraith understood that one of the best restraints on self-interested individuals and groups is the countervailing force of other no less self-interested individuals and groups, though one may hope that at least some self-interests can be ennobled, enlightened, and leavened by generosity and some measure of grace.²⁰

What Galbraith is unwilling to allow (and this also holds true for Niebuhr and Schlesinger as well) is for idealists and utopians to leave society unarmed against the unfettered self-interests of the powerful, against willful potential tyrants, and against the narrow private interests of cabals and cartels that use the levers of influence readily at their disposal to prosecute their ends at the expense of the common good. Thus Galbraith argued for political structures that legitimize, enshrine permanently, and reinforce with constitutional warrant the principle of countervailing forces, knowing that the powerful seldom place limits on their own power. Galbraith, incidentally, was profoundly impressed by the ways in which some persons forged the principle of countervailing forces into a socially and spiritually transformative mechanism. For example, he praised the manner in which Gandhi met British imperial power with an effective and asymmetrical exercise of non-violent resistance and Martin Luther King, Jr., adapted Gandhi's

¹⁹ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Anatomy of Power* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), 80-81.

²⁰ Cf. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 18.

methods to campaign for the end of racial segregation and injustice in the United States.

According to Galbraith, countervailing forces are the ultimate enemy of totalizing political powers. This caveat must be kept in mind, especially given the ways in which unchecked powers tend to hide their decision-making processes beneath a veil of secrecy. And this is particularly important to remember with reference to congregational leadership when the role of deliberative groups gives way to the authority of a single individual, especially when a charismatic religious leader is involved. In these cases it is all-too-easy for the veil of secrecy to be granted a divine legitimacy (the tragic reign of cult leader Jim Jones comes to mind).

John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, Lord Acton, well known for saying that power tends to corrupt, also said: “Every thing secret degenerates, even the administration of justice; nothing is safe that does not show how it can bear discussion and publicity.”²¹ St. Paul saw the connection between the darkness in our souls and our attempts to keep the light of day (actually, the light of God’s justice) from being shown on our motives.

Among the first casualties in any reign of secrecy is the integrity of leadership itself. When leaders fail to exercise their vocations honestly, hiding their actions behind walls of deception or within dark thickets of officially sanctioned obfuscation, when leaders refuse to submit their decision-making to the scrutiny of the public, not least the public that opposes them, and inevitably respond to legitimate criticism by resorting to political spin or outright lies—then the very offices leaders inhabit are invariably brought into disrepute. Countervailing forces (including the force exerted by the exercise of deliberation by legislative bodies in a democracy or of governing boards charged with the task of shared governance in churches and schools) are the

²¹ Richard Gid Powers quotes Lord Acton in his Introduction to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Secrecy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 1, a book that has become more relevant every year since its publication.

indispensable allies of good leadership, though their presence and healthy functioning will inevitably be felt by many leaders, at least occasionally, as an annoyance or worse. The countervailing forces help hold everyone accountable for the sake of the common good.

The Functions of Social Conflict

The social realism that characterizes Galbraith, Schlesinger, and Niebuhr would not be out of place with Lewis Coser in his analysis of the functions of social conflict. But Coser is neither a politician nor a theologian. He is a sociologist. And what he observes is all-the-more impressive because he approaches his study descriptively rather than prescriptively.

Coser's view of society would likely be seen by some, including utopians and social idealists, as pessimistic. While they would tend to view conflict as inevitably negative and understand it as diametrically opposed to cooperation and community, Coser sees conflict as at least potentially positive and constructive.²² He notes, for example, the ways in which conflict "serves to establish and maintain the identity and boundary lines of societies and groups."²³

Conflict, in fact, does things for a group that nothing else can do. Therefore conflict is neither a social stressor to be avoided, nor a necessary evil merely to be endured. Conflict represents those ordinary dimensions of social engagement by which individuals and groups, through negotiation, dissension, and disagreement, come to a clearer understanding of who they are, what they care most about, and what they should do in relation to others who may or may not agree with them. As Coser observes, this process of self-understanding is neither necessarily negative nor hostile, though he does not deny that conflicts can at times become negative, hostile, violent,

²² Lewis A. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York: The Free Press, 1956), 18.

²³ Coser, 38.

and destructive.²⁴ In this regard, he makes a crucial distinction “between conflict [*per se*] and hostile and antagonistic attitudes” that some people hold in a conflict. Hostility and antagonism are “attitudes” or “sentiments” involved in our “predispositions to action,” but they are not essential to a conflict itself.²⁵

If group members do not find ways to appropriately channel disagreement and dissent, Coser continues, then their ownership in the group may be diminished, and they may withdraw from it.²⁶ This is why Coser sees danger in a leader’s or an elite group’s repression of conflicts and disagreements among the membership of a group, ignoring complaints and dissents or failing to listen to perspectives with which the leadership does not agree. An organization is wise to provide routine mechanisms “which serve to drain off hostile and aggressive sentiments.”²⁷ And a leader is equally wise to support and reinforce these mechanisms of catharsis because they can act as safety valves to reduce the more extreme disruptive effects of conflict (such as rebellion or revolution), allowing differences to be expressed in the normal course of events.

Coser is clear-eyed in his assessment of those conflicts that contribute to the health and unity of a group and those conflicts that function only to tear groups apart. He recalls John Stuart Mill’s argument that “it is possible [for a group] to pass through turbulent times without permanent weakening of the political structures only if: ‘However important the interests about which [people] fall out, the conflict did not affect the fundamental principles of the system of social union.’”²⁸

Among the more important insights in Coser’s analysis of conflict is that groups that manage their conflicts well tend to be more lively, dynamic, interesting,

²⁴ Coser, 35-36.

²⁵ Coser, 38.

²⁶ Coser, 47.

²⁷ Coser, 48.

²⁸ Coser, 74.

open to diversity, flexible, and (at least potentially) resilient to change than groups that manage only to suppress differences. This insight is particularly important in the case of a pastor who wants to limit the deliberative role of the congregational board because he may, in fact, be undermining the liveliness, diversity, flexibility, and resilience of the congregation allegedly to make it more adaptive to change.

Coser's thought highlights the detrimental tendencies of leaders who are so obsessed with avoiding conflict that they will not allow a group to enjoy the good fruit of dissension. Whether the leader is simply afraid of conflict for psychological reasons (chief among them the personal anxiety some leaders suffer because they fear disapproval) or for social reasons (because they worry about the forces that may be let loose if conflict is not contained), Coser helps us understand that conflict often serves to make the leader and the group better, stronger, and smarter.

Coser's view of the world (and his resonance with "the doctrine of sin" to which we alluded earlier) corresponds with that which is presented in another champion of creative dissension, Nicholas Rescher, who writes: "The fact is that we live in an imperfect world. The resources at our disposal are limited—our own intellectual resources included." Rather than engaging in "utopianism that looks to a uniquely perfect social order that would prevail under ideal conditions" we should seek to make "incremental improvements within the framework of arrangements that none of us will deem perfect but that all of us 'can live with.'"²⁹ Indeed, rather

²⁹ Nicholas Rescher, *Pluralism: Against the Demand for Consensus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 4. Rescher's concept of "incremental improvements" is similar to what C. Ellis Nelson described as "disjointed incrementalism." Nelson argues in favor of an approach to leadership that believes "that sure progress in human affairs proceeds by small steps taken in a prudential mood with pragmatic reasoning." Nelson credits David Braybrooke and Charles E. Lindblom, *A Strategy of Decision* (New York: Free Press, 1970), 61-79, for this insight, which he explores in chapter 3, "Evaluation as an Aid to Decision Making," in *Using Evaluation in Theological Education* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1975), 63.

than avoiding conflict, the wise leader should “strive to make the world safe for disagreement,” realizing that “dissensus” is not only inevitable, but potentially productive when handled well.³⁰

The Value of Deliberative Processes

The pastor in our leadership vignette is not alone in his bias against deliberative processes. A strain of conventional wisdom holds that if you want good decisions you are on safer ground to seek the judgment of an expert than to listen to a group of people. The leadership version of the conventional wisdom holds that deliberation is largely a waste of time. If a group wants to move wisely and effectively, it should just find a wise and strong leader, and do what s/he says.

The always quotable contrarian H. L. Mencken once said: “No one in this world, so far as I know, has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people.”³¹ Conventional wisdom frequently endorses Mencken’s low assessment of the decision-making prowess of ordinary people and would support the idea that decisions are best left to the elite few or the one.

The Christian doctrine of sin, however, not only doubts the wisdom of entrusting a group’s fate to the unchecked will of a leader, it also calls into question the *wisdom of seeking wisdom* in the mind of any lone individual, even when that individual is very clever, very experienced, and very highly qualified.³² This perspective has been articulated most recently by James Surowiecki in

³⁰ Rescher, 5. For a more technical discussion of these themes, as well as a more detailed introduction to the related literature, see chapter 3 of my study, *Christianity, Tolerance and Pluralism* (London/New York: Routledge, 2004), which relates the thought of Isaiah Berlin and other political thinkers to social conflict in communities of faith, pp. 122-165.

³¹ James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (New York: Doubleday, 2004). The passage from Mencken is drawn from the jacket of his book.

³² This principle is codified in various church polities, for example in the polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in the “Historic Principles of Church Order” that appear in its Form of Government.

his influential book, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, the subtitle of which conveys the book's basic thesis: *Why the many are smarter than the few and how collective wisdom shapes business, economies, societies, and nations.*

I'm not sure I have ever come across any statement that better articulates the argument for deliberative processes than when Surowiecki elaborates his thesis in the following paragraph (which, by the way, provides the thesis for Surowiecki's entire book in just over 200 words):

[U]nder the right circumstances, groups are remarkably intelligent, and are often smarter than the smartest people in them. Groups do not need to be dominated by exceptionally intelligent people in order to be smart. Even if most of the people within a group are not especially well-informed or rational, it can still reach a collectively wise decision....Most of us...believe that valuable knowledge is concentrated in a very few hands (or, rather, in a very few heads). We assume that the key to solving problems or making good decisions is finding that one right person who will have the answer. Even when we see a large crowd of people, many of them not especially well-informed, do something amazing like, say, predict the outcomes of horse races, we are more likely to attribute that success to a few smart people in the crowd than to the crowd itself. As sociologist Jack B. Soll and Richard Larrick put it, we feel the need to "chase the expert." The argument of this book is that chasing the expert is a mistake, and a costly one at that. We should stop hunting and ask the crowd (which, of course, includes the geniuses as well as everyone else) instead. Chances are, it knows.³³

Diversity and difference, however annoying to a leader, are a great gift to healthy leadership. "An intelligent group," writes Surowiecki "... does not ask its members to modify their positions in order to let the

³³ Surowiecki, xiii-xv.

group reach a decision everyone can be happy with. Instead, it figures out how to use mechanisms to aggregate and produce collective judgments that represent not what any one person in the group thinks but rather, in some sense, what they all think.”³⁴ “Paradoxically,” he continues, “the best way for a group to be smart is for each person in it to think and act as independently as possible.”³⁵

Groups that respect, value, and practice the art of deliberation often find themselves in some degree of tension with their leader. This is both inevitable and good since one of the functions of deliberative process is to balance and, upon occasion, to check the power of leaders. But it is the wise leader who nurtures and makes full use of deliberative processes in the organization because deliberation makes the wise leader even wiser.

Attending to the process of deliberation, though it undoubtedly slows decision-making, also can ensure buy-in for changes and new ideas while allowing the changes and new ideas to benefit from and be modified by the group’s reflections. There may indeed be times when a group (whether a congregation or a school or a society) must respond quickly. Anyone who has ever led an organization will recognize that this is true. But these situations should be considered exceptional, rare occurrences; and the leader who proceeds without group deliberation should do so with the utmost caution. A leader who proceeds without group deliberation does so without the benefit of the matrix of group reflection that can complexify and problematize issues and that can develop solutions that take into account this complexity. A leader who proceeds alone also does so without the benefit of political “cover.” And, the very fact that deliberation slows decision-making can benefit leaders,

³⁴ Surowiecki, xix.

³⁵ Surowiecki, xx.

helping them resist their own tendency to “react” rather than to “respond” thoughtfully to crises.³⁶

Wise leaders surround themselves with bright persons who may not share the same perspective on issues of vital interest with one another or with the leader, an insight illustrated brilliantly by Doris Kearns Goodwin in her popular study of Lincoln’s cabinet, *Team of Rivals*.³⁷ Wise leaders encourage the fullest possible interplay of ideas among their advisors and in the deliberative bodies with which they work. It takes time, considerable energy, and personal courage on the leader’s part to allow these processes to function well, but the investment of time and energy and courage pays large dividends in the long run.

Integrity, human frailty, and leadership

The elder who called me with her complaint could not explain what it was about her pastor’s behavior that bothered her. But she knew that something felt wrong. Something in the pastor’s relationship to the congregation was out of balance. I believe she was right to name it a problem of integrity.

In the course of reflecting on her concerns I happened to turn to a passage from H. Richard Niebuhr’s classic, *Christ and Culture*. It is, I think, appropriate to end this essay by reflecting on his words. Niebuhr writes: “To make our decisions in faith is to make them in view of the fact that no single [person] or group or historical time *is* the church; but that there is a church of faith

³⁶ The distinction here between “reaction” or “reactivity” and “response” is rooted, of course, in Edwin Friedman’s work on leadership, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985); *Friedman’s Fables* (New York: Guilford, 1990); and the posthumously published, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, ed. Margaret M. Treadwell and Edward W. Beal (New York: Seabury Books, 1999/2007), though Friedman tended to denigrate shared governance in favor of the leader.

³⁷ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).

in which we do our partial, relative work and on which we count.”³⁸

Niebuhr makes this observation only after he has lamented at great length about our human frailty, about the web of moral ambiguity and tragedy in which we are caught, and concludes with a soaring description of faith in God that transcends and transforms our life together. He writes:

Without loyalty and trust in causes and communities, existential selves do not live or exercise freedom or think. Righteous and unrighteous, we live by faith. But our faiths are broken and bizarre; our causes are many and in conflict with each other. In the name of loyalty to one cause we betray another; and in our distrust of all, we seek our little unsatisfactory satisfactions and become faithless to our companions. Here the great absurd enters. What is the absurd thing that comes into our moral history as existential selves, but the conviction, mediated by a life, a death, and a miracle beyond understanding, that the source and ground and government and end of all things—the power we (in our distrust and disloyalty) call fate and chance—is faithful, utterly trustworthy, utterly loyal to all that issues from it? What is irrational here is the creation of faith in the faithfulness of God by the crucifixion, the betrayal of Jesus Christ, who was utterly loyal to Him. We note not only that the faith of Jesus Christ in the faithfulness of the Creator runs counter to all our rational calculations based on the assumptions that we are being cheated in life, that its promises are not redeemed, that we must count not only on broken treaties among men but also on having everything taken from us that has been given us and that we hold most dear, that we have only chance to count on, and that our chances are

³⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 256.

small.... Yet it is our conviction that God is faithful, that He kept faith with Jesus Christ... that Christ is risen from the dead; that as the Power is faithful so Christ's faithfulness is powerful; that we can say 'Our Father' to that which has elected us to live, to die, and to inherit life beyond life.³⁹

What I take from this extraordinary statement is a renewed appreciation for the humility required for our leadership, indeed for our life together in community. What I take from this is a measure of hope for every leader who strives to live and lead with integrity.

None of us has the full picture. No individual, no group, no church, no organization, no nation has the full and final perspective. If we hope to lead faithfully and well, if we hope for our ministries to matter, we must never forget this. Everything we do as leaders, every decision we make, is ultimately an act of faith, an act of trust, an act of hope which, while it cannot be extricated from our human frailty and failings, from the entanglement of our lives in the matrix of sin, nevertheless can have integrity inasmuch as it touches the hem of the garment of the God who is faithful and trustworthy, yet who promises to lead us beyond the boundaries of our own small hopes. If our leadership is an expression of faith in the perceptions and hopes of others, if, indeed, our leadership is ultimately an expression of faith in the God whose knowledge and wisdom are beyond all human understanding, then our leadership is also an expression of trust that includes considerable distrust of ourselves, distrust of our own motives, and ends, and of our own partial and flawed perceptions.

No leader *can* lead with integrity without an appropriate level of confidence in herself. This is quite simply true. But no leader *should* lead whose trust does not extend beyond herself, and whose self-confidence is unleavened by humility and reverence.

³⁹ Niebuhr, 253-255.