

LEADING GOD'S PEOPLE:

WISDOM FROM THE EARLY CHURCH FOR TODAY

BY: CHRISTOPHER A. BEELEY

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Christopher A. Beeley, in *Leading God's People: Wisdom from the Early Church for Today*, focuses on the ministry of bishops, priests, or pastors of the early church, whom he refers to as "primary leaders of the church," people engaged in the core task of shepherding God's flock. Early sources, the author argues, depict that bishops were the primary leaders of local churches who devoted much more of their time to pastoral ministry than to mere administration.

Beeley contends that pastoral ministry in the early church was characterized as servant leadership. Authority and service in pastoral ministry involve the demonstration of God's formative and redemptive power in the absolute humility evident in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Gregory the Great avidly accentuates this idea as he describes the key job of bishops as "servants of the servants of God" (11). Beeley references the epistle to the Ephesians, and notes that leaders are endowed with spiritual gifts to equip the saints for the work of ministry and for building up the body of Christ. He further asserts that our accomplishments as leaders should be measured against the maturity of people in Christ (14).

The gist of pastoral ministry is the imitation of Christ, the Great Shepherd. Beeley invites pastoral leaders to minister as fellow shepherds of God's flock, and he grounds his discussion in examples from the early church. He cites, for example, Gregory Nazianzen and Augustine, who remind us that Christ is "always the source, the standard, and the primary agent of ministry" whom leaders need to emulate closely (23). Beeley describes pastoral ministry as the "cure of souls," involving "mending, healing, and restoring individual and social life" (57) and, ultimately, "participation in the ministry of Christ himself" (74). Teaching and preaching of the word, as Augustine emphasizes, are the

primary vehicles in the cure of souls. Although pastoral ministry focuses on the “hidden person of the heart” (1Pet. 3:4), Beeley strongly asserts that it is no less concerned about the physical and social aspects of life.

Holiness is the main constituent of spirituality of pastoral leaders, adorned with the virtues of love, hope, and faith (34). Authentic leaders command credibility as they demonstrate these virtues in their life and ministry. Leaders, thus, shun vainglory, which Gregory the Great refers to as the prostitution of oneself “to the corrupting spirit in [one’s] lust for praise” (39). Pastoral holiness, on the other hand, is characterized by a continual humility and repentance, counter to the “moral rigorism” that was evident in the movement of Novatianism in the early church (53). Highlighting the needfulness of repentance, Beeley further avers that “repentance is the way to holiness for all Christians, but it is especially necessary for the leaders of the church” (51).

Church leaders encounter many challenges as they carry out the Trinitarian mandate of “leading people toward God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit” (24). Leadership challenges have to do with time management in not only the discipline of study and nurture of God’s flock, but also in administrative and philanthropic matters. Many of the early pastoral literatures indicate that church leadership is one of the most difficult of tasks. Gregory Nazianzus, for instance, reflects that “the leadership of men and women, the craftiest and most complicated of all creatures, seems to me the art of arts and the science of sciences” (54). The difficulty of guiding people, moreover, arises from the reluctance and unwillingness that people usually show toward endeavors to address their internal needs and the influence of satanic forces. Pastoral leadership, with all its challenges, however, remains a rewarding ministry for its immeasurable value in “building up the entire body of Christ” (120).

Wisdom from the early church can be used to enlighten our leadership practices within the church today. Beeley’s *Leading God’s People* could be an important source of wisdom both for leaders of a congregation and for training church leaders at every echelon, in spite of its tendency to emphasize the rather monochromatic pastoral leadership at the cost of

team leadership, which was an equally important and dominant type of leadership in the early church. This and other aspects of the early church leadership, therefore, remain fertile fields for further research.

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