

Foreword

AT THE HEART OF the Christian faith lies the paradox of the relationship between weakness and strength. Seen in the vulnerability and power of God, it is most sharply focused in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. All believers, with Paul “want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his suffering” (Phil 3:10). But if this paradoxical way of living is required of all Christians, it presents itself as a particular challenge to those in leadership within the church.

Leadership is usually associated with the exercise of power and secular role models are lauded for their strength. Weakness is associated with failure and an inability to achieve results. Recent trends have acclaimed “successful” leadership in growth and in mega-churches. Evidence suggests many pastors seek to imitate such models often without success. This is sometimes because they are adopting a leadership style for which they are not personally equipped and which works itself out negatively at the very least in their driving the flock and at worst in power abuse. This has too often only led to frustration on the part of all concerned. Where church leaders have capitulated to secular ideas of leadership they leave the biblical teaching about weakness and servant-hood lying bloodied and battered on the floor as a nice but impractical ideal. Yet other church leaders seek to accommodate the biblical teaching about weakness and servant-hood, more by adopting, albeit unconsciously, a strategy of compartmentalising. In the pulpit they are strong and authoritative, sheltering behind the words of Scripture but pastorally, one-to-one, they are weak, diffident, and even apologetic as they confront the complexities of real-life reality. Yet others exhibit a feebleness they mistake for what Scripture calls weakness which results in them in reality abdicating the leadership role altogether, but struggling to keep people very happy.

There must be a better way! There is, and this collection of essays helps to chart the way forward, without settling all the issues or prescribing a managerial technique that will ensure we avoid all the traps. Like

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spokes on a wheel these papers radiate from one hub, the hub that concerns the paradox of weakness and strength. Almost half the essays engage with Scripture. They display scholarly competence, theological imagination and a keen sense of practical application. The questions, of course, are not new, and the next chapters help us to reflect on the issue through the experience of Luther and Calvin. A third group of essays explores the theme from the perspective a recent theology. While some heavyweights are brought into the picture (Barth and Foucault), and controversial issues are confronted (the Openness of God debate), wonderful application and imagination is demonstrated in handling the contemporary issues of violence and image. Two essays on strength and weakness as they apply to preaching and leading in the local church appropriately bring the book to a conclusion.

One of the features of this book is the international nature of the team of contributors. Perhaps special attention ought to be drawn to the fact that nine of the writers are from Australia and New Zealand. My recent travels left me with the impression of a very lively (and able) community of evangelical scholars “down under” and a sense that more of their work should be available to the global evangelical community. So I am especially glad to commend this work. It is at least another small step in the right direction of overthrowing the hegemony of British and American theology.

As I have read the essays I have found them worth savouring, both as a pastor and a theologian. They invite us not to rush through but stop and reflect on our own styles of leadership. They have a personal and spiritual impact as well as being a worthy academic contribution to discussion.

If Paul’s experience, as set out in 2 Corinthians, is in any way a paradigm of ministry, rather than being the exceptional record of an apostle, then we cannot afford to neglect this topic, as, with a few notable exceptions, we have been tempted to do in recent years. After decades of hyping charismatic superstars and of admiring large church celebrities, this will help us to return to God’s strange, but constant and non-negotiable, ways where strength is exhibited in weakness and wisdom is channelled through folly. They will help us to experience in our leadership the constant tension of cross *and* resurrection-shaped discipleship.

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