SET THEORY AND LEADERSHIP:
REFLECTIONS ON MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES IN THE LIGHT OF EPHESIANS 4:11-12

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In this article, I attempt to ascertain the significance of set theory for leadership. In so doing, I strive to accomplish three objectives: first, to introduce set theory in a general way as a means for understanding churches; second, to develop the five-fold leadership model of Ephesians 4:11 within the framework of set theory; and third, once I have defined biblical leadership within the centered-set context, to discuss how a martyriological understanding of leadership can help distinguish biblical leadership from secular ideas of leadership on the one hand, and from pseudo-biblical ideas on the other. I close the article by discussing the educational implications that arise from viewing leadership from the vantage of set theory and martyriological self-understanding.

In this article, I attempt to ascertain the significance of set theory for leadership. I am not here referring to set theory as it is applied in mathematics or the hard sciences, but as it is used in missiological and ecclesiastical contexts. In this sense, set theory is the creation of the late Mennonite missiologist Paul Hiebert. In the 1970s and 1980s, Hiebert, who taught at several institutions including Fuller Theological Seminary,

formulated a number of keen insights, among them the idea of the "excluded middle"[1] and the idea that is reviewed here, set theory.[2]

I strive to accomplish three objectives with this paper. First, I introduce set theory in a general way as a means of framing the conversation to follow. In this first section, I briefly review how set theory is being used in contemporary discussions of the relationship of church and society, especially by those who represent the so-called "missional church" school of thought. Second, I develop what is called APEPT leadership theory[3] within the context of set theory. Though these two concepts are sometimes treated in the same body of literature, they are strangely not correlated. I hope to show that the centered-set construct helps make the functions of APEPT leaders clearer than has been possible up to now. Third, once biblical leadership is defined functionally in the centered-set context, the martyriological nature of leadership, which I have developed elsewhere,[4] comes into clearer focus. I hope to show that *martyria*, or witnessing presence, takes specific form in the apostolic, prophetic, and (most especially) evangelistic functions of the church. In the conclusion, I suggest some implications of set theory for the education of leaders.

I. OVERVIEW OF SET THEORY

Set theory, or social set theory, describes the relationship between organizations and their cultural and social environments. My discussion of set theory primarily concerns the church. In concept, set theory is quite simple and easy to grasp. When one leaves the abstract level, however, set theory rapidly becomes much more subtle and complex.

As formulated by Hiebert and others, social set theory postulates that organizations fall into one of three models: bounded, centered, and fuzzy sets. We will not consider fuzzy sets, which are organizations lacking in both firm boundaries and strong centers. Fuzzy sets are usually loose associations of individuals who have common interests, often casual. Insofar as churches are fuzzy sets, they would represent liberal, mainstream churches that have lost their theological moorings, and as a result have become voluntary associations of people of disparate beliefs.

Bounded-set organizations are those marked by firm outer boundaries that must be crossed by those wishing to belong to the organization. Hiebert lists a number of characteristics of bounded sets: the groups within the boundaries are homogeneous, static, and defined by their status within the group boundaries. Furthermore, members of the set are essentially identical, with hard criteria of self-definition. Bounded sets have strict rituals, rules, and language that make it possible for others to know who is in

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[1] On the "excluded middle," see Paul Hiebert's "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," in *Missiology* (1982): 35-47.

[2] Hiebert's discussion of social set theory and mission is located in chapter 6 of his *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

[3] APEPT is an acronym for the so-called five-fold leadership model of Ephesians 4:11, where Paul speaks of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.

[4] See Jack W. Niewold, "Incarnational Leadership: Towards a Distinctive Christian Theory of Leadership" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Regent University, 2006), and Jack W. Niewold, "Beyond Servant Leadership," *Journal of Biblical Perspectives of Leadership* (2007): 118-134.

and who is out. Though not strictly closed systems, bounded sets mark themselves off from the surrounding environment at the boundaries in such a way that there are ontological distinctions between those in the set and those without. Those wishing to traverse the boundary must do so through prescribed methods and rites and must demonstrate ontological change in their lives, language, and values. Conversion, usually instantaneous and dramatic, characterizes many of those within the bounded set. One of the chief concerns of those in the set is preserving the boundary, which in turn maintains and defines the category. No boundary, no set; no set, no organization. In spite of their hard boundaries, however, these kinds of organizations tend to have soft centers. If asked, many bounded-set members would have only the most general notion of their core values.

Centered sets, on the contrary, are dynamic rather than static. The chief characteristic of centered sets is that one's position in relationship to the organization has to do with one's direction towards or away from the center of the set, which is often an articulated vision or set of beliefs. Boundaries are self-imposed to some degree, but it is one's relationship to the center that is significant. Objects are viewed as distant from or close to the center, or as moving towards or away from the center. Members are not viewed so much as things in themselves, or autonomous beings in collectivity, but as persons in relationship with others and with the center of the set. Furthermore, those "within" the centered set (it is difficult to speak in terms other than "in" and "out," even of centered sets) are not identical with each other, but differ in their direction towards or away from the center and their distance from the center. Though the concept of conversion is important in the centered set, people are seen as moving along a continuum towards the center. The primary concern of those "in" this set is to bring others into relationship with the center, in this case, with a particular understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Centered sets, unlike bounded sets, have hard, well-articulated centers.

It is important to realize that these are ideal types, and that actual organizations rarely exist in such purified states. Most organizations, even tightly controlled bounded sets, exhibit some of the characteristics of centered-set entities. No organization that exhibits any growth can be completely walled off from its environment. New members must come from outside, even where replacement birth rates are adequate to maintain cognitive populations. Contrariwise, centered-set organizations find it necessary to establish some kind of borders in order to establish at least minimal definitions so as to unite the various members of the group. A strong cognitive conceptual center is itself something of a bounded set. It is in the main tendencies of these two models that their respective types become identifiable, even when they demonstrate a mixture of types. Thus, it is generally possible to recognize the bounded-set nature of, say, a group of missionary Baptists or Mennonites, in spite of any openness to newcomers that might be in evidence. On the other hand, the most porous seeker-friendly churches, which would readily fall into the category of centered-set organizations, have certain structures, hierarchies, and cultural traits that mark subtle but real boundaries between them and their social environments.

Nevertheless, the types do hold true most of the time, and are therefore useful on a number of levels, especially when paired in a polarity with each at opposite extremes

of a spectrum of mixed types. When this is done it becomes possible to think of organizations as more or less centered or bounded rather than having to force unwilling organizational structures into one mold or another. We are also able, by the use of a polarized spectrum, to see that organizations, especially churches, tend to move from centered-set organizations to bounded sets over time. This has happened with the Anabaptist churches in their long tradition, and has been the experience of many other evangelical and Pentecostal churches and denominations. It may be that the natural life cycles of churches lead, almost inevitably, to the drawing of boundaries and the formation of doctrine, polity, and group culture.

It is useful to remind ourselves that there are other sociological models relating to organizational types and their evolution. Ferdinand Tönnies spoke of the *Gemeinschaft* vs. *Gesellschaft* distinction, where high-touch communities (centered sets) stand in contrast with contractual human arrangements (bounded sets). Using yet another model, Rodney Stark distinguishes sects from churches in a most interesting way. Sects, he writes, start as groups of people in high tension with the surrounding society, but tend to evolve into churches, where such tension is reduced. "The transformation of sects into churches and the formation of new sects can be observed in all historical instances of monotheism," he writes.[5] Stark's typology would seem to be at odds with centered-set vs. bounded-set paradigms, but this may be a false impression. Groups that are in high tension with society, that is to say sects, may actually exhibit a centered-set mentality rather than a bounded set in that they have a firm core of beliefs but a low threshold for those wishing to belong, or join. This is in keeping with Hiebert's definitions of centered sets,[6] where boundaries are fluid but core beliefs are "hard." These kinds of organizations, Stark says, ultimately become bounded sets, where the center becomes softer while the boundaries become harder. This is, when one thinks of it, close to the definition of a typical Christian denomination, whether evangelical or mainline. Denominational churches form boundaries that include membership, catechisms, routinized leadership, and liturgies, while the hard center, which in the sects is often experientially defined, recedes.

No doubt other schemes exist that are helpful in explaining the phenomena of human groupings and their relationship to the dominant culture. To settle on just one, therefore, would probably be a mistake. However, there is something elegantly simple about Hiebert's typology that gives it great utility for our purposes. Like all good social models, his gives rise to creative speculation regarding application. One of the most interesting of these has come from the missional church literature of the past decade, where a creative combination of centered and bounded-set concepts has appeared. We will look at two examples where missional church literature uses these ideas to develop its ecclesiology.

In 1998, the volume titled *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*[7] came onto the scene. This work, a composite effort edited by Darrell Guder, set in motion what we have come to know as the missional church

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[5] Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 25.

[6] Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 124.

[7] Darrell L. Guder (Ed.), *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

movement and its close relative, the emerging church movement. The basic thesis of this book is that the breakdown of the old synthesis of church and culture, known as Christendom, is now a fait accompli, and that the church must sever its remaining ties with the old social order and take on the role of a missionary movement within that culture. This is an imperative both of its central role in the *missio dei* (mission of God) and of its unique character as, in a sense, the continuing incarnation of Christ in the world.[8] It is in chapter 7 of this work, "Equipping God's People for Mission," that set theory comes into play. In this chapter, Alan Roxburgh develops a model of leadership for the missional church that consists of a relatively small bounded set of individuals in covenant relationship within a larger centered-set congregation (see figure 1). This covenant community of leaders, along with the congregation, moves together towards the reign, or kingdom, of God.

> Thus the bounded-set style of the covenant community is not closed to the outside but constantly invites others to come and see that they too may participate. The covenant community has a missional ministry to those who are journeying within the contered-set congregation. People can enter the covenant process at many points along the journey as they see the way of Jesus and choose to follow him.[9]

In this context, leadership takes on an apostolic function in that it is oriented to turning the missional church as a whole towards the world as the community "sent" with a message of hope and humanization. The five-fold leadership model of Ephesians 4:11 is invoked by Roxburgh, but it is the apostolic calling that is most in need at present, both for the conversion of the church and the redemptive mission to the world. "Today apostolic leadership's function is to reestablish the reality and vitality of missional congregations," writes Roxburgh.[10] Missional theorists acknowledge that much of the early work towards this end will take place *within* the North American church, in order to effect its conversion from chaplain to Christendom to vanguard of God's reign.

A second book has appeared in recent years that uses set theory for charting the course of the missional church: *The Shaping of Things to Com*e by Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch.[11] "We suggest that in the centered set lies a real clue to the structuring of missional communities in the emerging global culture and the corresponding missional church," write Frost and Hirsch.[12] These authors do not locate a bounded-set covenant community within the congregational centered set, as Roxburgh does, but in their elaboration of the hard core of the centered set they seem to be describing something very close. In a formulation that has gained considerable notoriety, they use the metaphor of "sinking wells" to describe the attraction of the centered set, to which they oppose the metaphor of building fences for bounded sets. The authors are both Australian who use images from the outback to illustrate their ecclesiological model. If one sinks a well in the outback, they say, the cattle are free to move about without

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[8] Ibid., 13.
[9] Ibid., 209.
[10] Ibid., 215
[11] Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003).
[12] Ibid., 207-208.

fences, but they will not stray far from the source of water. "We allow people to come to Jesus from any distance and from any direction," they write. "The person of Jesus stands at the epicenter of what we do. He must shape everything."[13] Recently, Kyle Wingfield, European editor for the *Wall Street Journal*,[14] wrote of his experience in Brussels, where he and his wife attend a Christian church called "The Well." With 120 "members," this decentralized church sounds as though it has taken the Frost and Hirsch model to heart.

In a chapter titled "The Genius of APEPT," Frost and Hirsch develop what they consider a new kind of leadership. APEPT is an acronym that comprises the five-fold vocational enumeration of Ephesians 4:11: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. The apostolic calling is primary, the authors contend, though prophets and evangelists are also much needed today. "Paul actually sees APEPT ministry as *the* very mechanism for achieving mission and ministry effectiveness and Christian maturity," they write. "Pastors and teachers have had more than their share of responsibility in church leadership. It's time for the recovery of some sense of balance."[15] They go on to make the argument that, based on an exegesis of the entire context of Ephesians 4, Paul was not talking about a special class when he developed his ministry model, but *all* Christians. "Paul was not primarily describing, as is so often quoted, the official leadership of the church in this text, but rather the church itself, which we agree with. . . . There are no clergy or laity in the New Testament—all are ministers. . . . all would in some way fit into APEPT."[16]

The authors take pains to distinguish APEPT callings from leadership per se, saying:

> Leadership is a different thing altogether from APEPT giftings. . . . One can be a good minister and a terrible leader. . . . Leadership is that added something that enables one to influence and get others to follow. In short, leadership must be viewed as conceptually distinct from gifting and ministry. In some people they do overlap, but not in all.[17]

Nor should we think that the democratic processes by which ministers are chosen and hired in the free churches is adequate for the missional church in the new era. Though the authors do not identify how giftings will be identified, they emphasize that in the more egalitarian (a term they use, but dislike) church structure of the missional church the various callings will somehow come into effective play.

Frost and Hirsch do not correlate their model of ministry with set theory, except insofar as they assume that it will take apostolic leadership to form centered-set missional churches. Recall that, unlike Roxburgh, Frost and Hirsch do not have a formal role for bounded sets within their view of the missional church. I have taken the opportunity to discuss APEPT at this juncture because in the next section I hope to draw on their insights into ministry along with the ideas of Roxburgh in order to present

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[13] Ibid., 208.

[14] Kyle Wingfield, "The Well Spring," *Wall Street Journal*, November 23, 2007, D8.

[15] Frost and Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come*, 169.

[16] Ibid., 171.

[17] Ibid., 172.

a picture of Christian ministry and leadership within a centered-set community that surrounds a covenant community bounded set.

Set theory has given rise to a vigorous debate, and as part of missional church thinking will continue to provide an impulse for church planting.[18] One must recognize that much missional church energy comes from the direction of a renewed Anabaptist movement, which explains the prevailing countercultural ethos of the discussion. Not all theorists agree that the North American context represents a functional Christendom that is now passé, and that even if the term Christendom is granted for purposes of discussion, the modern (as opposed to the postmodern) cultural context should not necessarily be repudiated.[19] This caveat has less to do with my subsequent discussion of the relationship between apostolic leadership and set theory than with the need to identify dominant objectives of those already active in the missional church scene. On the other hand, the Anabaptist voice is a legitimate one and may contribute greatly to our understanding of the extent to which many traditional evangelical preoccupations may constitute idolatry.

II. THE RELATIONSHIP OF SET THEORY TO APEPT

The APEPT model of Christian ministry is worked out in chapter 10 of Frost and Hirsch's volume.[20] As mentioned above, the process for selection of ministers is not identified by the authors, although they do indicate that such leadership is both functional (rather than ontological) and charismatic (rather than elected or appointed). One can only conclude that such ministry, or leadership, will emerge from the dynamic processes of the missional church as it encounters the exigencies of its time and place. "If we read the passage [Ephesians 4:1-16] as a unit, the church's inherent capacity to mature is inextricably interwoven with its capacity to foster a full-fledged APEPT-style ministry and leadership system."[21] Nothing is more important for the effectiveness of the missional church than the development of such ministry. "We believe that leadership must intentionally build an organic human system *before* actually triggering the activities of that system."[22] In other words, leadership does not seem to emerge from a church already actively confronting the powers and principalities, but must be identified at some time and in some setting prior to the founding of a church. At the same time, one must ask how leaders can be identified until there are those who can so identify them. The

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[18] See the following URL for a discussion of these issues: http://www.3dff.com/php/viewtopic.php?t=386.

[19] Most missional church theorists are eager to pronounce the now-classic formulations of H. R. Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* irrelevant for today's post-Christian context. Others do not agree that the church should abandon efforts to influence the general culture and political realm so quickly. For a contemporary restatement of Niebuhr's thesis, see T. M. Moore, *Culture Matters: A Call for Consensus on Chrstian Cultural Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007). Writers across a broad spectrum, from the late Jacques Ellul to the contemporary social analyst David F. Wells, have argued, like the Anabaptists, that the Western church must beware of too cozy a relationship with the techniques and values of the age, but this does not always lead to a renunciation of Western culture, in either its modern or postmodern expressions. One is inclined to think the word "Christendom" is, for some church theorists, a code word for any non-missional church.

[20] Frost and Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come*, 165-181.

[21] Ibid., 168

[22] Ibid., 211

only answer seems to be that missional churches must come from other missional churches as satellite bodies of sent individuals, primarily apostles, who set up local churches and begin the process of ingathering.

To help in the identification of potential leaders, Frost and Hirsch provide brief descriptions of the functions of the various callings that Paul names in the passage. The authors emphasize that such callings are not mutually exclusive, meaning that any Christian in such a church may at any time exhibit any, or even more than one, of the functions, though each will at the same time demonstrate a dominant functionality.

The APEPT callings are as follow: apostles, who are pioneers who plant and oversee missional churches; prophets, who discern the times and forces at work in the world surrounding the church and explain the meanings of things to both the church and to the world;[23] evangelists, who proclaim the gospel to the world such that people are turned toward the center of the church's life; pastors, who are concerned with the harmony and spiritual growth of the inner core; and teachers, who open the Word of God in such a way that discipleship ensues and others are brought into the inner core of the church from the centered-set, ever-fluid larger congregational pool. Frost and Hirsch do not address other ministerial roles that we find in the New Testament, such as elders, bishops, and deacons. It may be that these are considered housekeeping roles of an impromptu nature, intended to deal with specific issues such as the feeding of widows (Acts 6:1-7), occasional preaching and teaching (I Tim. 5:17) by those who may wear other leadership mantles, and for performance of other day-to-day activities.

Though Frost and Hirsch discuss bounded vs. centered-set churches in chapters 3 and 12, and leadership in chapters 10, 11, and 12, they do not go the next step to delineate how APEPT leadership functions within their model of the church. Like the contributors to the Guder volume, especially Roxburgh, Frost and Hirsch come to the conclusion that the only viable structure for the church is an inner, bounded core of believers within a larger community with a porous and shifting periphery.[24] They enumerate the qualities of leaders needed for such churches, including entrepreneurial, sociological, communication, and marketing expertises.[25] They conclude by writing that "the church needs to recover the apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic functions to be an authentic missional church."[26] Once again, they state that the pastoral and teaching functions are overrepresented in the church. But one is left to wonder how these various functions and competencies of leadership interact with one another, and how they relate to the various boundaries and peripheries of the missional church. I would like to

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[23] Frost and Hirsch do not say that the prophet has a public function, but it can hardly be doubted that this is central to the calling. Evangelists promulgate the gospel to the public world, but the prophet's role is the explication of historical and theological values and insights to both popular and high culture. Francis Schaefer exercised a prophetic gift that crossed religious, cultural, and philosophical lines. It cannot be denied that the NT prophet, such as Agabus, also foretold the future, and served the church in this manner. There must be, however, a prophetic leadership place for Christian intellectuals, those who question, disturb, agitate both the church and the host society of the church. For a general overview of the prophet and the prophetic gifting, see Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000).

[24] Frost and Hirsch, *Shaping of Things*, 208-210.

[25] Ibid., 219

[26] Ibid., 222.

advance the discussions of these two insightful books one further step by exploring how the two concepts—set theory and APEPT leadership—work together. My purpose in doing this is to help individuals struggling with their own callings, on the one hand, and churches struggling to formulate the roles for their various leaders, on the other.

The five-fold ministry of Ephesians 4:11, abbreviated here as APEPT, has been the subject of much discussion, and a full bibliography of relevant studies would exhaust many pages of small print. Furthermore, as already noted, there are other terms in the New Testament related to ministry and leadership, variously rendered as bishop, priest, deacon, servant, elder, witness, etc. Making things even more complicated are the catalogs of spiritual gifts, or *charismata*, which overlap to some extent the functions of the five-fold ministry but go beyond these in some respects. Nevertheless, in spite of this apparent confusion, the Ephesians passage provides a *locus classicus* for church "origin, order and destiny," as Marcus Barth contends in his commentary on Ephesians.[27] According to Barth, the five-fold callings of verse 11 are meant to edify the entire church in such a way that the latter itself becomes the witness of Jesus Christ. He writes:

> All the saints (and among them, each saint) are enabled by the four or five types of servants enumerated in 4:11 to fulfill the ministry given to them, so that the whole church is taken into Christ's service and given missionary substance, purpose and structure. . . . [T]he dignity and usefulness of the special ministries given to the church are as great or as small as their effectiveness in making every church member, including the smallest and most despised, an evangelist in his own home and environment.[28]

Barth goes on to indicate that all of the titles listed in 4:11 have one thing in common: their foundation in verbal communication.[29] This sets these leaders apart from the larger number of saints who, though receiving the ministry of the apostles, etc., do not necessarily replicate that work. The saints at large take the teaching and exhortation given them and carry forth the work of the church indicated in verse 12: the building up of the body of Christ into a mature spiritual community. It is possible that in the fellowship of the saints the various other leadership ministries, those of overseer, elder, deacon, and so forth, come into play as a kind of second echelon. This understanding preserves the special status of the five-fold ministry while at the same time providing a place for the much wider, even universal, giftings and callings of all the member saints. Such an understanding also permits the casting of the five-fold ministry, and especially the functions of apostle, prophet, and evangelist, as expressions of *martyriological* leadership, a category of leadership very special in the New Testament. The essentially verbal, or *kerygmatic*, nature of the five-fold ministries marks them out as occupying a particular role in the early church, as I have attempted to show elsewhere,[30] and may offer clues as to their place in the contemporary context where the church encounters the wider world, a subject taken up in the next section. For the moment, let us continue

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[27] Marcus Barth, *Ephesians 4-6: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 477-484.

[28] Ibid., 479.

[29] Ibid., 483.

[30] Niewold, "Incarnational Leadership," 243.

our discussion of this special group of APEPT leader functions, placing them in a church structure where set theory is brought to bear for the purpose of clarifying their roles.

Figure 1 shows the nature of a centered-set organization where a hard center of committed believers is surrounded by a larger congregation of believers, half-believers, or seekers. The periphery of the centered-set church is porous and imprecise, as indicated by the broken boundary line, while the arrows indicate individuals in the process of moving toward or away from the center. Those moving toward the center would be individuals coming into an increasing awareness of, and a more articulated response to, the claims of Jesus Christ on their lives. Those moving away might be those who are losing their hold on the center, those who are not ready for the commitment of those at the center, or those who are confused or temporarily thrown into doubt and unbelief. In the centered-set church the two realms, center and congregation, are not static categories, and it is possible for individuals to leave even the committed center, as shown in the diagram. Neither is the "church" as a whole,
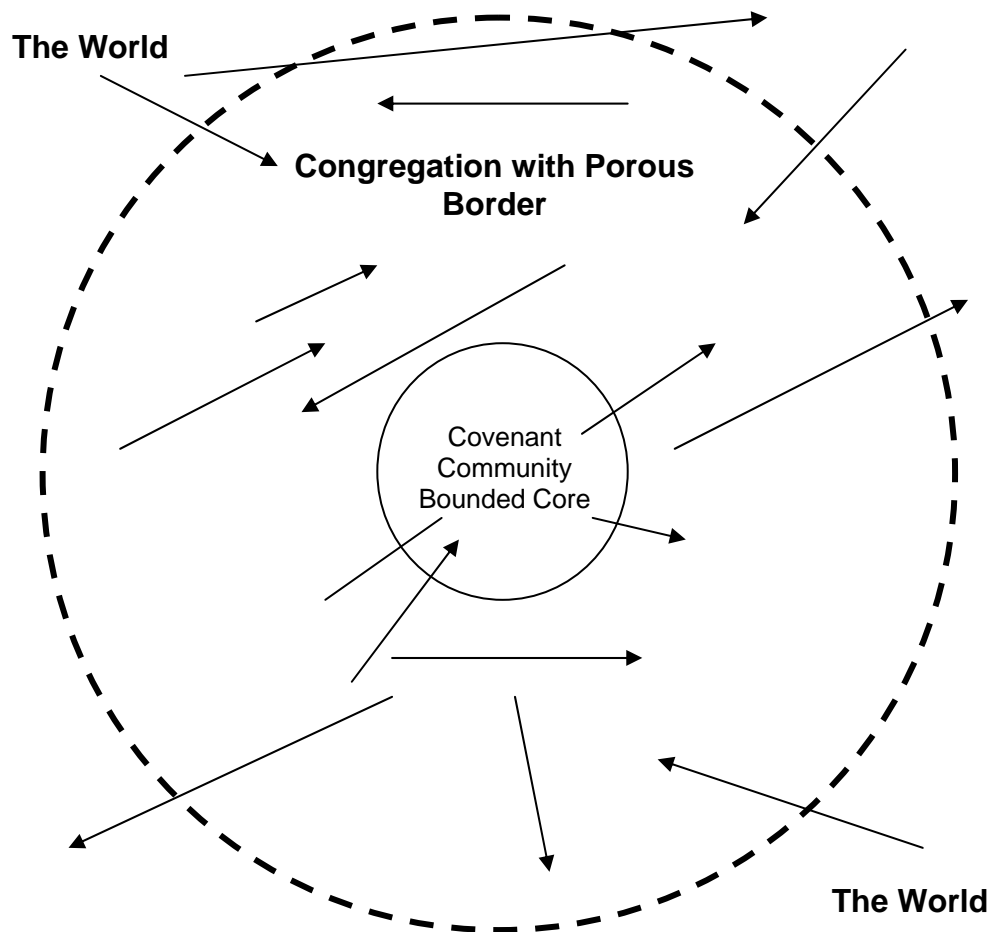

Figure 1. Centered-set organization with bounded core.

The World

Prophets: On the Boundary for the World

Centered-Set Church With Bounded Core

Covenant Community — Pastors & Teachers

Evangelists: On the Boundary for the Church

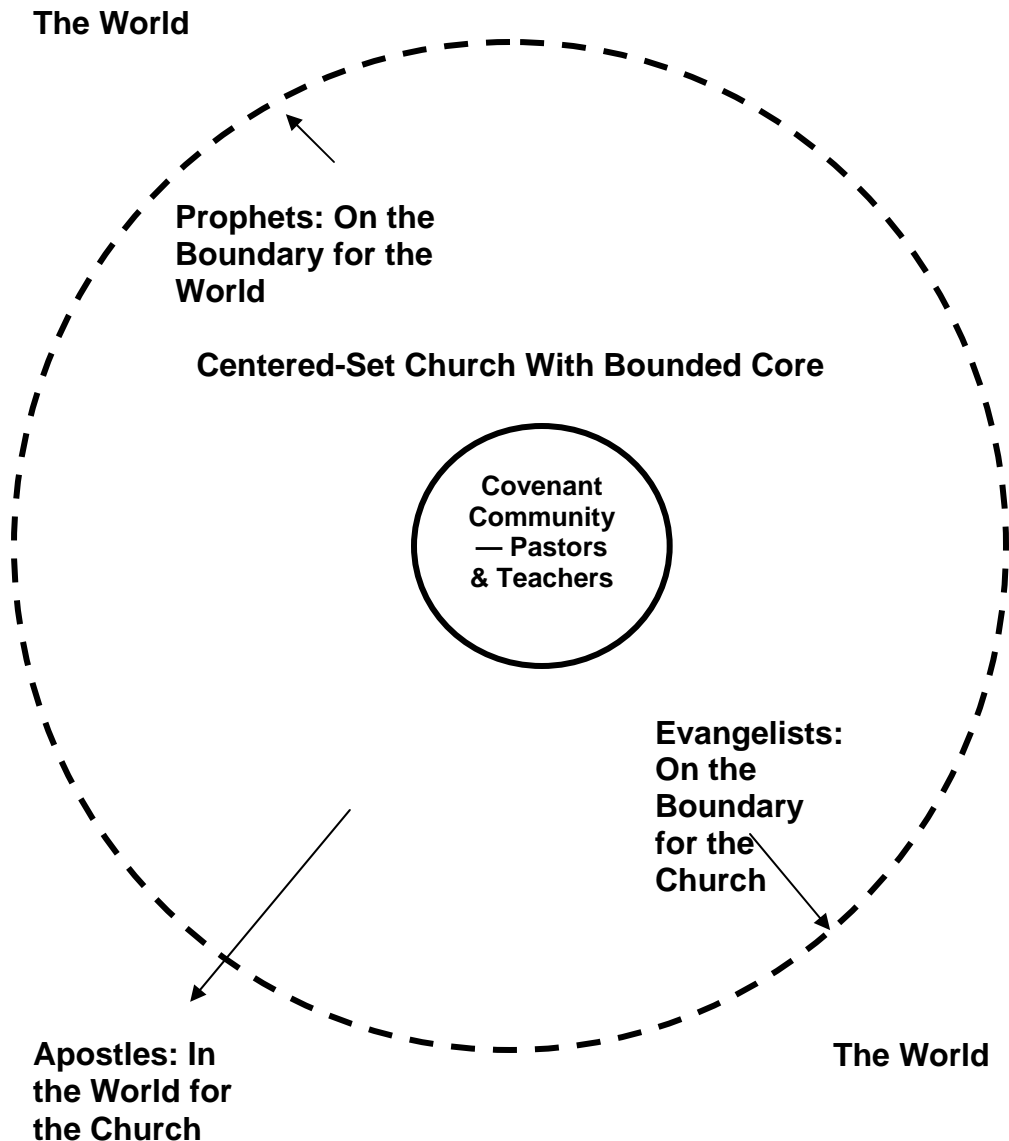**Apostles: In the World for the Church**

The World

Figure 2. Centered-set church showing positions of APEPT leaders.

when the two realms are taken in combination, static in relationship to its greater context. As Roxburgh shows in his graphics,[31] the church is on the move, pilgrim-like, through the world on its way to "God's reign."

We turn now to a brief discussion of the interaction of APEPT leadership, or ministry, to the centered-set organization just presented. In figure 2, I have placed the various ministry functions of Ephesians 4:11 in the locations within and without the church where it is most likely their primary callings will be fulfilled. To help explain why I have placed them where I have it is necessary to identify the major characteristics of

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[31] Guder, *Missional Church*, 213.

each function. We look first at the graphic and then I describe the roles of the various players.

Apostles are those who, in a paraphrase of Barth,[32] go abroad as authorized preachers of Christ. In contemporary terms, apostles are church planters whose primary role is actually outside the sphere of *the* church in general, although like all leaders they are understood only in relationship to *an* existing church and are an expression of that church's missional impulse. Apostles work deep in the world, scouting out groups of people, preaching, laying the groundwork, asking questions, and establishing teams of people who become new "centers." They are led by the Holy Spirit to people, places, and opportunities often unseen by others. They are entrepreneurs who seem to make something take form when before there was nothing there. Like prophets, shortly to be discussed, they are the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20, 3:5).

Prophets in the early church were of several kinds, and their roles included teaching, prediction, direct revelation, equipping of the saints, and consolation.[33] Their distinguishing mark, however, was that they spoke a word of the Lord with authority. "Their special charisma," writes Barth, "appears not only to have been in making predictions of the immediate future—as in the case of Agabus (Acts 11:28)—but above all in applying the gospel to specific contemporary circumstances."[34] In figure 2, I have placed modern prophets near the periphery of the congregation to indicate their ministry as being, when put missiologically, a cross-cultural one. Prophets are those who speak both to the church and to the world, the latter role encompassing an apologetic function.

Evangelists are closely related to apostles,[35] but their work is more specific. These individuals reach into the world and turn the hearts and minds of unbelievers to faith in Christ. Whereas apostles seek out opportunities to plant churches, evangelists bring people into the church once it is planted. I have placed them, like prophets, near the periphery of the church congregation, again to indicate that they work across the cultures that mark the line between world and church.

In a centered-set church, apostles, prophets, and evangelists function differently than they do in traditional bounded-set churches, where these functions are usually interpreted internally, if at all. Indeed, the only function of the three really recognized by bounded-set churches is the evangelist, who is often viewed as one calling to outsiders across the boundary to come into the church from the inside, or as the itinerant "guest speaker" or revivalist who calls wayward Christians back to the Lord. The apostolic and prophetic functions are not widely recognized to be active in traditional churches, which would find such individuals problematic for the maintenance of the boundaries. This does not mean that such individuals do not exist in traditional churches, only that their unique roles are not recognized, and their true callings are usually mediated through programs or para-church ministries. In centered-set churches, on the other hand, apostles, prophets, and evangelists would theoretically emerge within the committed

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[32] Barth, *Ephesians*, 437.

[33] André Lamorte and Gerald F. Hawthorne, "Prophecy, Prophet," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology,* 2nd ed., ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 961-962.

[34] Barth, *Ephesians*, 437.

[35] Ibid., 438

core, from which they would be sent out to reach, challenge, and exploit the general host culture.

Pastors and teachers[36] function primarily within the core of the missional church rather than in the congregation, though of course their influence is felt there too. As any pastor will tell you, his work is also cross-cultural in that it has to span the boundary between the vital few on the inside and the larger, less committed congregation, where all levels of understanding and commitment prevail. In the missional church, the pastor works with what, in business, are known as the strategic assets, the 20 percent who do 80 percent of the ministry. These, he trains to work among the larger congregation, and it is their work that encompasses many of the roles and offices (overseers, priests, elders, deacons, servants, etc.) that we find in the letters of Paul and Peter. It goes without saying that these individuals are also busy within the core covenant community, where they serve to identify and raise up the apostles, prophets, and evangelists for the expansion of the church.

At one point, Frost and Hirsch put APEPT leadership in the context of secular leadership theory, asserting that the functions of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher are exactly the competencies and gifts needed by any successful human organization. The apostle is the visionary groundbreaker, the prophet the disturber of the status quo, the evangelist the communicator and recruiter, the pastor the empathetic humanizer, and the teacher the systematizer and theorist.[37] I have been impressed how the first three of these functions, or those most needed by the missional church (and traditional churches), correspond with the three types of individuals necessary for what Malcolm Gladwell calls a *tipping point*, a social or intellectual "epidemic," or a sudden business success. First is the *connector*, the individual who spans different worlds through "some combination of curiosity, self-confidence, sociability, and energy."[38] We might call such people impresarios in public life; in the church we call them apostles. They bring people and things together in a way that initiates a movement. Gladwell's second indispensable player in the success of social phenomena is the *maven*. "[J]ust as there are people we rely on to connect us to other people," writes Gladwell, "there are also people we rely upon to connect us with new information. There are people specialists, and there are information specialists."[39] These are socially motivated experts who spread the message that the connector initiates, in the process making the message compelling and comprehensible. This is much like what the prophet does, at least in his public apologetic role: he shapes the gospel message so that it finds interest in the secular, unbelieving world, where it shatters indifference and false confidence. But there is one further step in the initiation of a tipping point. "Mavens are data banks,"

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[36] It is not clear from the Ephesians text whether these are two functions or a single category that Barth calls "teaching shepherds." The Greek wording and syntax is ambiguous, and it may be that we are really dealing with a four-fold ministry rather than a five-fold. In any event, as Frost and Hirsch write on several occasions, these two functions, whether taken together or separately, are much over-represented in traditional churches. Nevertheless, they are legitimate ministries that must be carefully cultivated in a church of any kind.

[37] Frost and Hirsch, *Missional Church*, 173-174.

[38] Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2000), 49.

[39] Ibid., 59.

Gladwell writes. "They provide the message. Connectors are social glue: they spread it. But there is also a select group of people—Salesmen—with the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing, and they are as critical to the tipping of word-of-mouth epidemics as the other two groups."[40] Gladwell goes on to indicate that these charismatic persuaders are much more complex than we imagine, and that their ability to infect others with emotion goes well beyond motivational techniques. Nevertheless, is there not a kind of parallel between these persuaders and the evangelist, who has the gift for calling his hearers to repentance and faith?

The three types of individuals that Gladwell identifies are each needed in the life process of a tipping point, and there would be no breakthrough without the interaction of all of them. Gladwell goes on to show the other factors that must be present in the genesis of a social tipping point, but the lesson for us here is that the roles of the apostle, prophet, and evangelist are sociologically sound as well as theologically orthodox. Furthermore, they create synergy when they are present in the church. Any church that ignores these functions does so at its peril, and, sadly, too many of them do so. Finally, it is critical that these functions occur in the way provided by the centered-set church, near the periphery or outside the periphery of the church. If bounded-set churches attempt to incorporate the apostolic, prophetic, or evangelistic functions within the limits of their cognitive framework, the results are likely to be distortions of the biblical functions. Apostles may come to resemble autocratic cult personalities turned inward on the congregations that raised them up; prophets might turn churches into Pentecostal centers that cycle endlessly through internal demonstrations of signs and power; evangelists would come to resemble revivalists who show up for spiritual emphasis weeks, inviting the same crowds forward for "healing" or "recommitment" who come forward every few months. In short, the power of God will be turned inward and the field of mission largely unreached.

Let me summarize here. In the foregoing, I have drawn on the work of those in the forefront of the missional church movement who have fleshed out Hiebert's distinction between bounded-set and centered-set churches. I have attempted to suggest ways in which we can envision the work of the various New Testament ministries and leaders within the context of the centered-set church. I have suggested parallels between Paul's apostolic leadership functions and sociological insights provided by others, particularly Malcolm Gladwell. These insights may help to define the social functions of apostles, prophets, and evangelists and to show that such functions are at the heart of any successful movement, sacred or secular. It is time now to turn to the third objective of this study, which is to link APEPT leadership with the biblical concept of martyria. It is not enough to find commonalities between biblical concepts of leadership and non-biblical, secular constructs. If this is as far as leadership studies take us, we may be in danger of assuming that the application of sociological insights and marketing technology will ensure success within the church. This assumption underlies much church leadership literature and practice, and has in some instances led

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[40] Ibid., 70.

to less than satisfactory results.[41] We must, if we are to be faithful to the Holy Spirit, mark out the limits of what we can learn from the world and learn it, but go beyond it. The concept of martyria, explained below, allows us to do this by offering a category of leadership that is distinctively Christian in that it is grounded in an understanding of the *self in Christ*. I hope to show that martyria is a governing category for church ministry and leadership in that it provides a criterion to determine the authenticity of any particular expression of leadership by subjecting it to the test of "witness."

III. CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP AND MARTYRIA

Martyria is a Greek New Testament term translated variously as "witness," "gospel," and "testimony" according to context. It is one of a word group that includes the more common *martys* (martyr) and several verb forms meaning "to testify." As I have argued elsewhere,[42] martyria has an even more general meaning that connotes one's presence or vocation as a witness, and is thus an ontological category. Martyria describes both the act of proclaiming the gospel and the content of the gospel proclaimed. It *describes* on one hand an activity and a message that stand apart from the general activities and communications that make up most of the church's mundane life, and *prescribes* a level of commitment, on the other. Central to martyria is the crucial dimension of public proclamation of the resurrection of Christ. The scriptures, particularly the Gospel of John and the Apocalypse, seem to suggest that martyriological leadership is limited to those who stand on the boundaries of two worlds, often endangering their own lives or welfare in the process. Martyria does not necessarily imply one giving one's life for the gospel, but the fact that so many early witnesses did so has marked the term martyr with the idea of self-sacrifice. In the Apocalypse, writes Verbrugge, "[t]hose who suffer and are killed because of their relationship with Jesus are likewise called faithful witnesses (see Antipas in 2:13; cf. 6:9; 11:3, 7). . . . To be sure, what stands in the foreground is not so much one's death but one's appearance as a trustworthy witness of Jesus."[43] Strathmann[44] agrees with this assessment while bringing a sharper focus to it. Concerning the meaning of martyrdom, Strathmann argues, one is not a martyr because he is put to death; one is put to death because he is a martyr, a witness to Jesus Christ. In the Johannine writings, Strathmann contends, martyria refers to a specific activity as well as the subject matter of that activity. And that activity is carried on by a special class of individuals that John calls "prophets." In fact, the testimony of Jesus *is* "the spirit of

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[41] The current flurry of interest in the apparent admission of failure of church and leadership models within Willow Creek Church by Pastor Bill Hybels may point to an instance of the misapplication of secular models of marketing. At this time the conclusions to be drawn from this episode are uncertain, but it does appear at the very least that Hybels has indicated that much that Willow Creek has thought to be discipleship over the years has been a "mistake." See the following link for some of Hybel's comments: http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2007/10/willow_creek_re.html.

[42] Niewold, "Incarnational Leadership," 236-244; Niewold, "Beyond Servant Leadership," 118-134.

[43] Verlyn D. Verbrugge, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 357.

[44] Hermann Strathmann, "Martyr, etc." in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. IV,* eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 474-514.

prophecy" (Rev. 19:10). This testimony (martyria) of Jesus, Strathmann writes, "is the witness which they have, *not as Chistians, but as Christian prophets*. They have it, not as a secure possession, but as a task, i.e., in order that they may pass it on. . . . This is why they are prophets."[45] Not every Christian, in other words, is a martyr, even those who bear witness. The terms martyr and martyria are reserved for a particular group of individuals with a special task.

The early church seemed to recognize something that has subsequently been lost, that the designation "prophet" in the present age is attached to a discrete set of activities (i.e., those that take place on the border between church and world and have to do with the proclamation to the world of the gospel of salvation). These activities would seem to pertain to those apostolic leaders we have identified as apostles, prophets,[46] and evangelists. These, because of their liminal existence, would be carriers of the testimony of Jesus, hence of the spirit of prophecy. There would be no true Christian apostolic leadership that is not also prophetic martyria. To discuss Christian leadership in the absence of martyria, or witness, is to discuss something other than apostolic leadership.

In the centered-set church as developed above (figure 2), this prophetic calling would attach to the three functions just mentioned, but would not, it seems, apply to the functions of pastor and teacher, except indirectly when those callings relate to the training of the inner core of committed believers to enter into apostolic leadership roles.[47] In short, certain callings identify more closely with martyriological leadership than do others.

Finally, let us recall that Barth determined the common feature of the callings of Ephesians 4:11 to be their character of *verbal* witness.[48] Apostolic leaders were speakers, preachers, proclaimers, disputers, declarers, debaters, polemicists, and persuaders. They were also denouncers, rebukers, and censurers. One calls to mind the early church father Origen, who disputed with the philosopher Celsus, and who gave his life as a martyr in his mid-sixties for his witness to Christ. These early witnesses were only to a degree the empathetic, consensual figures so dear to modern sensibilities. They used words, often backed up with actions and sometimes miracles, to

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[45] Ibid., 501 (my italics).

[46] The spirit of prophecy need not conflict with the more specialized prophetic calling in Ephesians 4:11. It may be that the three designations, apostle, prophet, and evangelist, may all represent aspects of a single gifting, which the scriptures, especially the Apocalypse, but the OT as well, would recognize as prophetic. In the world of the OT, prophets carried on all of the functions of apostles, prophets, and evangelists associated with the NT. Elijah's work was in some respects apostolic in that he pioneered communities of prophets. Jonah was evangelistic, taking the Word of the Lord to the Assyrians. All prophets in the OT were prophetic in the narrow NT sense of challenging the Israelites as well as their pagan or apostate overlords and conquerors.

[47] This by no means devalues the latter two functions, which are critical to the good order of the church and to the cognitive education and training of the committed core. Failures in either of these functions can spell the end of any church's effectiveness in its environment. Furthermore, since the testimony of Jesus (martyria) is as much a task as a possession (Strathmann), any member of the church may, theoretically, assume the mantle of the apostle, prophet, or evangelist at any time, though we are not aware of this being the case except in the case of occasional prophetic utterances.

[48] Barth, *Ephesians*, 483.

win a hearing in the wild and dangerous arena of public life. They were not always well-received, and some, like Origen, paid the highest price a human can pay.

The verbal nature of apostolic ministry is in accord with the meaning of martyria, where oral witness is central. Almost all of the New Testament's instances of witness are verbal acts, sometimes called *kerygma*, meaning proclamation. Today, in our media-soaked world, kerygma or martyria would encompass the written and acted word as well.[49] There was little of the "lifestyle witness" so beloved by the exponents of servant leadership and related initiatives, though of course the letters of Paul are replete with instructions in holy living. But for the most part, the ethical instructions of the epistles served the peace of the believing community and were intended to bring glory to God rather than favor with the world. Towards the world, the church was more often instructed to adopt a stance of hostility and defiance (e.g., such as we find in the Epistle of Jude). The letter of Jude is not the exception in this regard, but more the rule, with its attitude of near-bellicosity. "Earnestly contend [*epagonizesthai*] for the faith," writes Jude (v. 3). This is what it meant to be a witness in the early church, and although there was little to be gained by pointless antagonism towards a host culture, there was, and is, almost nothing of profit in accommodating to it. At the heart of biblical leadership's approach to the world is the spoken word hurled forth like a summons to one's own trial.

To summarize, the biblical concept of martyria appears to modify, indeed to govern, the leadership callings of Ephesians 4:11, especially the first three. It puts vocal witness of one kind or another at the heart of these callings, and turns their focus towards the public square. Apostles, prophets, and evangelists are not primarily intra-ecclesial actors, but instead exist to engage the principalities and powers outside. Only incidentally will the prophet warn the church of the ways in which it compromises with those same principalities and powers. The latter is properly the work of the pastors and teachers, who will sometimes perform prophetic functions. It is sad but true that in our time many pastors and teachers have shown that they are ill-prepared for these endeavors, and prefer merely to carry on the management of congregations as an alternative. This indicates a loss of leadership in our time and its replacement with what David Wells calls the "passive agency of process." It will do little good to set in motion programs (more processes) to identify and position Christian leaders unless we simultaneously steep these people in the martyriological mindset.

IV. CONCLUSION

The early church had few spectators or tire-kickers among its adherents. The stakes were often very high, and those who threw in their lot with the curious band of Christ-followers needed to quickly ascertain their roles within and without the church. All adherents were in some measure activists, and it was important that each understood his or her own strengths and gifts. For those who signed on, there were extended periods of catechesis. Christian commitment was not for the faint of heart.[50] A Roman official might at any time decide to execute a few Christians in order to please emperor

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[49] See T. Francis Glasson, "Kerygma or Martyria?," *Scottish Journal of Theology 22* (1969): 90-95.

[50] See Robert L. Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven: Yale, 2003), 36ff., and *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven:Yale, 1984), 23.

or subjects. Though circumstances have changed, at least in the West, there is still a need for Christians to discern their callings, particularly among those who aspire to leadership (I Tim. 3:1). Therefore, any effort to define the various leadership and ministry functions of the New Testament is potentially helpful to practitioners in understanding their callings within the church. Would it not be beneficial if aspiring ministers knew with some certainty, for instance, which of the APEPT callings, if any, they identified with? Might this not lead to a series of life choices that could multiply the effects of their efforts? In light of newer schools of applied psychology, such as programs that stress the cultivation of personal strengths rather than deficiencies, would there not be a better alignment of gifts, chosen occupations, perceived callings, and courses of study?

For instance, in the New Testament passages we have looked at with set theory in mind, pastors seem to have two main functions: nurturing the general spiritual health of the inner core group of believers, and helping to identify and prepare leaders for ministry in the congregation and, in a few instances, beyond the perimeter of the congregation. They share the latter work with the teachers.[51] Teachers have a more specific central function, that of providing grounding in cognitive and practical theology to those who will minister to the congregation, such as deacons and elders. Teachers also presumably train those who will go out as apostles, prophets, and evangelists, and with pastors perform ongoing ministry to these same individuals when then need refreshment and encouragement.

One can only dream of the day when all of these separate ministries are identified by local churches so that individuals can receive training that is appropriate for the needs of missional and traditional churches alike. Pastors could concentrate in the areas where they would actually be required to perform, such as counseling and psychological profiling, the devotional arts, and practical discipleship. Teachers would do the bulk of the public speaking in churches, which would mainly constitute instruction and systematic, active, and inter-active learning. The traditional sermon would fall away, or become more closely tied with events in the world and church. Worship, music, and praise would be the ministry of those so gifted, without this falling on pastors and teachers, as it all-too-often currently does.

Evangelists in such a setting would be trained in cross-cultural studies and communication arts and media. They would know how the various traditions have historically drawn unbelievers into faith.[52] They would understand worldview formation and the principles of spiritual warfare. Their training might include language skills, rhetorical arts, and dramatic presentation.[53] Evangelists would need close but critical awareness of popular culture to function well. It might be necessary for evangelists to have charismatic personalities.

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[51] Barth, *Ephesians*, 438. Here, Barth prefers to see four, rather than five, functions in Ephesians 4:11, with pastors and teachers being one calling, that of "shepherd teachers." In any event, as Barth himself admits, the Greek construction is ambiguous, and the issue not a critical one.

[52] See Rick Richardson, *Evangelism Outside the Box: New Ways to Help People Experience the Good News* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2000).

[53] In this connection one thinks of Rob Bell as an example of a contemporary evangelist. Bell's use of the media and his mastery of dramatic techniques have been very effective in reaching unbelievers as well as challenging the traditions of American evangelicalism.

Prophets, as speakers to the structures and powers of the world, would, like evangelists, need to understand worldview formation and analysis. These would be by far the most "educated" of the leaders, with the possible exception of teachers. Many of them would be academics and journalists. Wide reading in classics as well as contemporary *belles-lettres* and history would be essential. Prophets are the poets and litterateurs of the church, but their work would go beyond a mere aesthetic interest. These are the apologists for the faith, and they would be involved in the controversies that engulf culture and church (e.g., design vs. evolution). Their education would comprise creative writing, classic and modern languages, economics, and theology. Some of them would be trained in the hard sciences.[54] Their work, unlike that of the teachers, would be chiefly focused on impacting the world rather than the church. Much of their work would be characterized as *preparatio evangelium*, paving the way for the gospel. This group, unlike evangelists, would not necessarily need charismatic personalities.

Apostles are much like entrepreneurs, as noted above. They would "go native" in the sense that they would enter into the world as scouts, locating those places where God is at work, to bring the forces of the church into line with that divine work. These persons would have to have a high tolerance for ambiguity. As "connectors" (Gladwell), apostles would be the most "worldly" of the church's leaders, using that term to mean worldly-wise rather than secular. Many early missionaries were in actuality apostles, as was the original missionary, Paul the apostle.

Apostles would combine many of the functions and characteristics of the other leaders. Perhaps for this reason, APEPT leadership is often simply called "apostolic leadership." Like the prophet, apostles would have to understand the structures of the world and know how to communicate in that milieu. Like the evangelist, they would be involved in active witness as part of their exploratory work. They would probably be of charismatic personality, though not necessarily so. Their skills would have to go beyond those already mentioned. These persons would need business, law, real estate, managerial, finance, and leadership competencies, combined with solid analytical expertise in sociology and statistics. Cross-cultural survival techniques would be essential, as would education in urban missions.

Many APEPT leaders would most likely have careers in the professions and trades, and those proficiencies would contribute to their apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic credibility. Like people everywhere, they would have their particular interests, hobbies, passions, and aspirations, all of which would make them unique personalities in their settings. Of course, every leader would need to live a life of exemplary moral rectitude and be a person of vibrant personal devotion.

The point of the foregoing exercise is simply to indicate that we should begin to think about the various roles and functions of leaders, and set about preparing to nurture such leaders. Such initiatives are not quick fixes, and nobody should expect an easy transition from the current pastor-centered traditional church to the diffused leadership that we have discussed here. There may be resistance, including resistance even to discussing these concepts. Seminaries are not yet equipped for the training of

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[54] Examples of contemporary prophetic voices are those of Phillip E. Johnson, Richard John Neuhaus, and the late Francis Shaeffer, but there are many such individuals in our time.

such ministers, even if they were conceptually agreeable to many of the concepts of the missional church. It is unlikely that many denominations will welcome the new paradigm offered here. Yet one can hope that all churches, whether they share the Anabaptist aversion to cultural renewal or not, will take seriously the imperatives of the times for a new kind of leadership. Perhaps the mainline and denominational churches will yet reinvent themselves, taking on some of the characteristics of the missional and emergent church models with their centered-set social personalities and decentralized leadership.[55]

About the Author

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[55] This seems actually to be happening in some locales. I know of a denominational Baptist church that has planted a satellite church that is very different in form and expression from the mother church. It remains to be seen how independent the younger church is allowed to be, but from all appearances the original church, which is now numerically smaller than its satellite, has shown complete restraint towards interfering with its newer plant.