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BEYOND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

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I argue that the servant leadership model that has been widely adopted by Christians has not been an unmixed blessing. Servant leadership in its secular form is based on non-Christian secular and religious ideas. But even in its Christianized form it is reflective of a heterodox and distorted Christology, which it in turn helps to perpetuate. I attempt to identify the elements of Christology that modern evangelicalism and its version of servant leadership neglect. Next, I endeavor to rehabilitate these neglected aspects of Christology in order to formulate a new model of leadership that I call *martyria*, a biblical term that I briefly explicate. Following a short exercise where I speculate what *martyria* might look like today, I argue that it is within this new martyriological model of leadership that the servant motif finds its true home. The implication is that when servanthood is lifted from its matrix as adjunct to *martyria* and permitted to usurp a central role in leadership formation, the result is weak leadership ill-suited to the exigencies of our time. Martyriological or witness-based leadership, on the other hand, contains the role of servant, but is much better suited in critical ways to the present historical *kairos*.

In recent decades, the idea of servant leadership has become the prevailing model of leadership within the Christian community, as a Google.com search will readily show.¹ By now the outpouring of literature and activity relating to servant leadership is

¹ At the time of writing this paper I did a Google advanced search using the two combinations “Christian transformational leadership” and “Christian servant leadership.” The results for the former were approximately 273,000 references, while the latter yielded approximately 1,950,000 references.

familiar to many people.² As both a theoretical and a pragmatic paradigm, the servant motif leaves other leadership paradigms, such as charismatic or transformational, far behind. But this state of affairs may be due for a change. Recently there have been stirrings of discontent. Some have questioned the servant motif on moral, metaphysical, and biblical grounds.³ I am generally sympathetic with those who take a skeptical approach to servant leadership, not least because the undue attention paid to it may have prevented the development of alternative leadership models. The thesis of this article is to suggest another paradigm for Christian leadership, one more in keeping with the exigencies of our time, yet one in the context of which the servant motif will find its true expression. In the text following, we will first look at the cracks in the foundation of servant leadership, then discuss a different sort of Christian leadership that may be more suited to the world in which we are coming to live.

I: The Uneasy Hegemony of Servant Leadership

H. Richard Niebuhr, in his 1951 book *Christ and Culture*, wrote the following: It would not be surprising if a new school of interpreters arose in the wake of [the] existentialists with an attempt to understand him [Jesus] as the man of radical humility. But the humility of Jesus is humility before God, and can only be understood as the humility of the Son. He neither exhibited nor commended and communicated the humility of inferiority-feeling before other men. Before Pharisees, high priests, Pilate, and “that fox” Herod he showed a confidence that had no trace of self-abnegation. Whatever may be true of his Messianic self-consciousness, he spoke with authority and acted with confidence of power.⁴

These words were a prophetic admonition that in many regards went unheeded. In the decades following Niebuhr’s warning, a mixture of existentialism, applied psychology, and Eastern mysticism provided much of the impulse of progressive intellectual culture in America and the West.⁵ Out of this milieu arose a number of new spiritual currents, one of which was the teaching of Robert Greenleaf called “servant leadership.”⁶ Greenleaf’s ideas caught on quickly in the secular sphere and have been widely accepted in Christian circles that were themselves prepared for it by this same cultural *Zeitgeist*. One might say that post-Lausanne evangelicalism and servant leadership were made for each other as the “radically humble” Jesus of Niebuhr’s vision became the rage of both movements. Today it is difficult to visit evangelical churches, colleges,

² Amazon.com currently lists approximately 2,400 books on servant leadership. This scarcely begins to cover the subject, however, since the scholarly literature in servant leadership, which is not significantly included in Amazon’s listing, is itself immense.

³ For critiques of servant leadership, see, for instance, Yvonne Bradley, “Servant Leadership: A Critique of Robert Greenleaf’s Concept of Leadership,” *Journal of Christian Education* 42 (1999): 43-54; Joseph Maciariello, “Lessons in Leadership and Management from Nehemiah,” *Theology Today* 60 (2003): 397-407; Mark Wells, “Servant Leadership: A Theological Analysis of Robert K. Greenleaf’s Concept of Human Transformation,” UMI Microform 3124330 (2004), an unpublished doctoral dissertation.

⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951), 26.

⁵ On the intellectual developments in America and their influence on the church, see any of D. F. Wells’ recent books, especially *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

⁶ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist, 1977).

or service organizations where there is not at least some mention of servant leadership. Recently, a young pastor told me, "During my four years at a Christian college I heard about servant leadership countless times. In fact, it is one of the strongest memories of my education, though I have never been clear what it meant." Servant leadership has become a mainstay of popular books and seminars for Christian confessional groups as different as Southern Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Pentecostals. To those who ask, "Who is talking about servant leadership?," the reply is "Who isn't?"

But is servant leadership a benign presence? In spite of its near-universal popularity, I want to suggest that this uncritical acceptance of servant leadership by Christian leaders has a distorting effect on our understanding of who Jesus Christ is, what his work is, and what his continuing presence in the world is to look like. The orthodox *Christology* that had loosely prevailed in the West since the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) has given way to a modern Jesuology that inhabits liberation, secular, and evangelical theology alike. Nor has this development been a mere academic project. Many of those who set out to domesticate servant leadership for use by Christian leaders and ministers have themselves been changed by the strange figure they have invited into their midst. I would like to point out some of the doctrinal components of this development.

II: The Heterodox Jesus of Modern Evangelicalism

I will identify three theological developments that, when taken together, form a Christological composite very different from the Christology of the early church and the Reformation. Familiarizing ourselves with this new composite may help us to understand why servant leadership has found such a ready reception within modern evangelicalism, and why evangelicalism in turn has failed to challenge the tenets of servant leadership. The three developments predate servant leadership's appearance, but they provided a seedbed where it readily took root and flourished in American Christianity. Contemporary worship, missiology, and ministry have all been changed in the process. I would suggest that the current fascination with the concept of incarnational theology and practice is part of this same process.⁷

In the discussion following, I present each of these three theological developments as a polarity. Each of the poles represents a necessary but incomplete view of an aspect of the doctrine of the incarnation. The tendency will be to view the polarities as opposites, though it is more correct to think of them as complements. When the two poles are taken together, they form a synthesis that represents a more complete doctrinal unity. This will become clear as we proceed. It is important to keep in mind that the polarities are fictional devices that I use for the purpose of discussion.

⁷ In my recent unpublished doctoral dissertation, I distinguished between two ways in which the term "incarnational" is applied to leadership and ministry. First, incarnational as an adjective is used loosely to refer to contextualization in missions and to lifestyle witness in ministry and leadership. This is the far more common employment of the term. The primary exponent of this version of incarnational ministry is Darrel Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1999). The second use of the term is as a theory that describes an ontological witnessing presence, based on Christological anthropology. I have developed this theory in *Incarnational Leadership: Towards a Distinctly Christian Theory of Leadership* (PhD dissertation, Regent University, 2006).

There is no suggestion that the two poles I identify for these doctrinal issues exhaust the matter for any of them. Yet I hope that the use of polarities will clarify the issues under discussion. The polar complements will be italicized.

III: Kenosis and Pleroma

First, the so-called *kenotic* (empty) emphasis in the scriptures, whereby the earthly ministry of Jesus is understood primarily in terms of his surrender of the prerogatives of deity, has in pastoral theology come to dominate and eclipse the *pleromatic* (full) emphasis, which accentuates the constant deity and progressive glorification of Christ as man, most notably in the writings of John. Kenosis is usually associated with the synoptic gospels, but also with certain Pauline writings, particularly the hymn of Phil 2:6-8. We might say that Phil 2, the *locus classicus* for kenosis, has crowded out Col 2, a pleromatic passage, as a description of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

But it is a mistake to see the life and work of Jesus merely as a progressive march to the cross accompanied by a number of signs and wonders and humble acts of mercy calculated to bring Christ glory only in hindsight. The coming of Jesus is the coming of the kingdom of God and the conquest of the enemy. Thomas Oden expresses the pleromatic view of Jesus as follows:

While incarnate, the Son was truly God. Scripture does not teach that his divinity ceased, was cast aside, absorbed, or left behind. As incarnate Lord he acted in a way that only God can act: forgiving sin, giving life to the dead, revealing the secret thoughts of persons, dividing loaves and fishes, and laying down his life and taking it up again.⁸

The kenotic Jesus we meet in the pages of much popular leadership literature, on the other hand, is closely related both to the Jesus of nineteenth-century liberal theology and to the contemporary Jesus of “open theism.”⁹ Here is a Jesus almost completely identified with us in our human tentativeness and angst, for whom leadership is largely a matter of communicating self-fulfillment and empowerment to his disciples.

IV: Latin and Classic

The second development occurs when contemporary evangelicalism amplifies and refocuses an existing doctrinal trend whereby the earthly life of Jesus is accorded autonomy vis-à-vis his death. Here we see the near-complete loss of what Gustaf Aulen identified as the classical view of the atonement of Christ and its replacement with what

⁸ Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life: Systematic Theology, II* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1989), 114.

⁹ “Open theism” refers to a recent movement within evangelicalism that calls into doubt many of the historic Reformed doctrines, such as God’s foreknowledge, foreordination, and wrath. Open theism seems to have intellectual affinity with process theology, and in its dilution of the gravity of sin and the need for radical justification open theology is akin to the Liberalism of the nineteenth century and its twentieth-century descendants. The chief exponent of open theology is Clark Pinnock, whose book *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), seems to be the primary text of the movement.

the same author calls the Latin view.¹⁰ Though Aulen's thesis has never, even from the first, gone unchallenged, his typology is compelling. The classical view of the atonement, in brief, stressed that the life of Jesus, no less than his death, is integral to his saving presence in the world. This view is closely related to the pleromatic emphasis presented above. Many theologians of the early church, such as Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Gregory of Nyssa, looked upon the life and work of Jesus as one of conquest of the powers of darkness through strong and peremptory command as much as through vicarious surrender and death. Jesus' acts, according to this early imagery, were warrior acts intended to deceive and conquer the evil one who had until then held humanity hostage. In spite of its occasional tendencies to fantastic extremes, this view of the atonement held sway through the early Middle Ages. The death of Christ, in this view, was seen as a ransom paid to release the souls of the lost, held in thrall by the evil one. "Its central theme," writes Aulen,

is the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ—*Christus Victor*—fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the "tyrants" under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself.¹¹

The primary alternative to the classic view of the atonement, which dates from the work of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo?* (ca.1090), is to a large extent the only view known in the West today. This view, variously called the Latin, forensic, objective, or substitutionary understanding of the atonement, has the effect of centering the work of Christ in his death, which is viewed as a penalty paid to God for humanity's sin. This view tends to result in separating the death of Christ as a salvific event from the life of Christ. The latter, Christ's life, comes to be viewed as of secondary importance, something perhaps to emulate but not equal to his death. Moreover, once the life of Christ is demoted, as it were, from a soteriological to a moral event, the temptation is to reduce it further to a mere model, example, or object lesson for human imitation. It is in this sense that servant leadership interprets the life of Jesus, and in so doing helps perpetuate the Latin view at the expense of the classical, or dramatic, view of Christ's saving work. Because servant leadership's picture of Jesus is consistent with the exemplary model of Christ's life that results indirectly from the Latin view, there has been little critical attention given to alternative Christologies within the field of leadership. Servant leadership reinforces what many wish to believe about the son of God rather than what might otherwise be believed. Much of servant leadership theory seems to be based on circular reasoning: since Christian leadership according to the common argument must of necessity be servantlike, and since Christian leadership is based on what Christ was like, Christ must have been above all else a servant. But was he?

V: Divinization and Humanization

The third way in which modern evangelicalism reinterprets the doctrine of the incarnation is, paradoxically, to empty the latter of much of its anthropological

¹⁰ Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

significance. It may seem odd to bring anthropology under the rubric of the incarnation, but for the Christian this is exactly where we must address the problem of the human. If the kenotic-pleromatic polarity relates to the person of the incarnation, and the Latin-classic polarity to the work of the incarnation, this next polarity addresses the question of the historical means, the how, of the incarnation.¹² The how of the incarnation, its historical manifestations, is intimately involved in the question of the human, since Christ is present in the world through men and women who have his Holy Spirit. His person and work are channeled primarily through them. This ongoing presence of Christ is what I mean by Christological or incarnational anthropology, a concept that goes far beyond ideas of our being the “hands and feet of Jesus.” I have divided this third dimension of the incarnation into two aspects, the *divinization* of the human as one pole and the *humanization* of the human as the other.

In regards to the first two polarities discussed earlier, evangelicalism distorted each by suppressing one aspect while thrusting another forward. That is, the classic view of the atonement and the pleromatic view of Christ’s life were suppressed. Here, in the anthropological dimension, there has been a suppression of *both* aspects of the polarity. It is as though an anthropological meaning of the incarnation does not exist, as though the act of God becoming man has no human implications beyond the “saving of our soul” or inspiring us to good works. That is, the incarnation is usually understood only instrumentally, but not ontologically. But “[t]he incarnation has vast importance beyond Christology, strictly speaking,” writes Oden, “for it teaches us about our very selves.”¹³ And what it teaches us is that the vocation to be fully human goes beyond what most of us imagine.

We will look at two implications of Christological anthropology for human experience. These have to do with the means whereby the incarnation acts on the human and through the human on the world. The first implication is what in theology is called divinization, the divine process whereby, in the formulation of Barth,¹⁴ the humanity of the believer is taken up into the divinity of Christ and thereby transformed. This somewhat mystical process is called by the early theologians *theosis*, or *theopoiesis*, and is understood as the actual communication to humans of some of the essence of God.¹⁵ Eastern Orthodoxy to this day speaks of theosis as a synonym for

¹² David F. Wells, in his recent Christology, *Above all Earthly Powers: Christ In a Postmodern World*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 7-8, describes how, in contrast to a Christology he had written twenty years earlier, that doctrine has come to encompass three aspects rather than the traditional two of the person and work of Christ. Now it is necessary, Wells holds, to add a description of *how* the incarnation is to be communicated in the culture of our time. I agree with this. I take this to mean that the gospel must be transmitted according to categories intrinsic to the doctrine of Christ rather than according to human standards, say of a Tillichian type. This casts a great deal of doubt on our efforts to contextualize the gospel. In my model of leadership, developed in this paper, I draw on the doctrine of the incarnation itself, rather than sociological or philosophical insights, to supply the categories necessary for the proclamation and propagation of the gospel.

¹³ Oden, *The Word of Life*, 106.

¹⁴ Barth, cited in Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 224. See also Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 4/3.

¹⁵ Theosis, variously called divinization or deification, is a term that came to be attached to the doctrine that the believer in the act of believing and devotion takes upon himself or herself something of the very nature of divinity. This teaching is the correlative of the doctrine of the incarnation, whereby Christ takes upon himself the essential nature of humanity. Theosis holds that just as Christ was glorified in

salvation itself, though in the West we have so lost track of this teaching that it will be unfamiliar to most Christians. Currently there is a rediscovery of this theological category occurring in the West, but it is still a neglected aspect of Christian anthropology, perhaps due in part to its superficial resemblance to certain Mormon teachings and to New Age panentheism.

The second anthropological implication for us is what we might call the humanization of the human that we find in the incarnation. By this I mean that it is only through the incarnation that we can understand what true humanity is to look like. "For Christian anthropology it is a matter of capital importance that in Christ human nature appeared in its original and authentic form," writes Robert Louis Wilken.¹⁶ Humanization is the antidote to the excessive spiritualization to which our faith is prone, on the one hand, and the tendency toward reducing faith to ethics, on the other. With the concept of humanization the focus is nearly always on the public, historical expression of the incarnation, a posture that complements the inner personalism of divinization. It is through the human agency that Christ is revealed to the world, and it is in the form of the human that Christ is most clearly seen and understood. "The incarnation is constitutive of certain worldly realities," writes Colin Gunton. "It achieves things... Simply, the incarnation achieves its redemptive end by a form of divine immanence in the world."¹⁷ Until the nineteenth century divinization and humanization were implicitly held together, even when they were not clearly understood. In recent times this has changed, either by a neglect of Christological anthropology altogether or by stressing one aspect to the neglect of the other.

VI: Humanization and Leadership

I wish to develop the idea of Christological humanization at greater length, since this is the basis upon which a model or theory of Christian leadership must be developed. It is critical for theorists of leadership and other human arts and sciences to understand this doctrine. Where humanization occurs in the biblical sense, the program of God moves forward historically and socially. Humanization, when linked to and undergirded by divinization, provides a broad and stable platform for Christian action that is not accessible through kenotic imitationism.

Humanization may also be viewed as the corporate dimension of the incarnation, in the form of the church, and especially in its purest embodiment, the missionary movement. The missionary movement has been, quite simply, the most humanizing event in history, though it has become unfashionable for Christians to admit this in

the flesh, so the flesh was glorified in him. The doctrine was held by most of the early church fathers to one degree or another. Theosis is found in Irenaeus, Athanasius, and John of Damascus, among others. In recent years there has been a renaissance of sorts in the study of this ancient doctrine. Curiously, it is Lutherans, particularly in Finland, who have led the way here. See, especially, Carl Braaten and Robert W. Jensen (Eds.), *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *One With God: Salvation as Deification and Justification* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004); and Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (London: Oxford, 2006).

¹⁶ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven: Yale, 2003), 154.

¹⁷ Colin E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 90.

recent decades. Hendrikus Berkhof sees modernity itself, in all its self-contradictions, as the expression of Christological humanization in its missional form. “The first and central mark of [the Kingdom of God in history] is the continuation of the missionary movement,” writes Berkhof. “We have become so accustomed to it that we walk amidst the miracles without seeing.”¹⁸ But this humanizing aspect of the doctrine has also often been changed from its biblical meaning and made captive to various ideologies. Liberation theology, for instance, made much of humanization some years ago, intending with the term to convey something like “man come of age”—a new form of post-Christian humanity. The secularization of Christianity, it was held, was a new and more advanced form of faith that would universalize the *missio dei* and bring it into alignment with those social currents that, to the liberationists, promised social justice, equality, and, to many, the end of capitalism. Choan-Seng Song, a Taiwanese liberation theologian, made humanization one of the centerpieces of his program,¹⁹ though he was hardly the only one to link humanization with utopian ideology.

But biblical humanization is much more than, and perhaps something entirely different from, Marxist programs of liberation theology. Humanization, as noted, is the other side of divinization; as such, it is the apprehension, within the life of the church and in the experience of individuals, of the essential humanity that we see only in Jesus Christ. Humanization, in this sense, comprises not so much notions of personal fulfillment, but rather the historical and public expression of the saving incarnation acting through faithful lives, the church, and the kingdom of God in time and place. Individuals who represent the humanization of the incarnation become, in the words of Brunner, truly “historical.”²⁰ Catholic historians such as Christopher Dawson and Thomas Woods²¹ interpret the core of what we know to be Western civilization as the outworking of this incarnational principle through people and institutions. Humanization is the public face of the inner transformation denoted by theosis and is never far removed from the program of God in disciplining the nations. When humanization is held in proper relationship with divinization, the results can be world-historical. The recent interest in the abolition of slavery in early nineteenth-century England under the influence of William Wilberforce highlights an instance of this kind of biblical and theological humanization.

It is in such a theological environment that we must develop our ideas of Christian leadership. Our work in this world is determined by our understanding of ourselves as participants in the very incarnation of God in Christ. Popular evangelicalism and its version of servant leadership, on the other hand, present a much-reduced theological composite: a Jesus divorced from the pleromatic and classic influences of historical doctrine and an implicit agnosticism concerning the anthropological dimension in either its divinizing or humanizing impulses. The result is a dehistoricized Jesus whose life and example is pushed forward at the expense of his

¹⁸ Ross Langmead, *The Word Made Flesh: Towards an Incarnational Missiology* (New York: University Press of America, 2004), 134-137.

¹⁹ Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History* (Richmond: John Knox, 1966), 124-125.

²⁰ Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947), 450.

²¹ See Thomas E. Woods, Jr., *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2005) and Christopher Dawson, “Civilization in Crisis,” *Christianity and European Culture: Selections from the Work of Christopher Dawson*, ed. G. J. Russello (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1998), 65-83.

atoning life and death and whose ongoing presence in the world is seen as a disembodied spirituality. Here is a Christianized humanism suited to the modern autonomous self unfamiliar with, and even hostile to, such essential soteriological categories as transcendent holiness, sin, personal moral corruption, repentance, conversion, and even *missio dei*. It is little wonder that servant leadership glides easily across the great ontological divides that separate traditional orthodoxy from postmodern spiritualities. This fits well with the technocratic culture of postmodern business. For the conflicted and tragic world beyond the soft certitudes of the modern corporate bookshelf, however, servant leadership has little to offer.

Furthermore, servant leadership is characterized by inward-directedness and Pelagianism. By inward-directedness, I mean that servant leadership stresses the interior mental and spiritual processes of the leader as the means whereby outward change is effected. "Consciousness precedes being," writes Parker Palmer, "and consciousness can help deform or reform our world."²² By Pelagian, I mean that the servant posture often presents itself as the means whereby both the leader and the follower find their human fulfillment, apart from the transforming power of Jesus Christ. Servant leadership seems to say that it is the process of choosing servanthood over alternative pursuits that affects the life-changing experience of individuals and organizations. In true existentialist fashion, this choosing renders the leader's existence authentic, and such existence, whatever it may mean, is alone efficacious for organizational well-being. Here is the personal construction of reality common to many Pelagian movements.

Servant leadership as commonly understood is, then, an heir to these Christological distortions that have arisen in modern times, and, in turn, perpetuates them in the Christian context. What would happen, however, if we bring to bear on the issue of leadership those missing elements of Christology: the pleromatic understanding of Christ's person and the classical, or dramatic, view of his atoning work? Furthermore, what if we brought these neglected aspects into contact with a Christian anthropology that stressed divinization and humanization? I suggest that we could recover a much strengthened biblical conception of leadership that goes well beyond servant leadership, which at the same time has the resources to recast servanthood in its proper role, as an expression of biblical humanization. And just as the allure of servant leadership was part of the theological weakening of popular evangelicalism over the past thirty years, perhaps a more biblical theory of leadership will help us find our way back to a more robust Christology.

VII: Theological Foundations for a New Model of Christian Leadership

If the above critique is even partially accurate it would indicate that the time has come for a new approach to biblical leadership. Let me bring forth at this point work that I have already done on this subject. I suggest that we adopt and build upon the biblical concept of *martyria*, which can be rendered, loosely, as "witness" or "testimony." More specifically, the term may be taken to mean confirming the truth through one's own

²² Parker J. Palmer, "Leading from Within," *Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant Leadership*, ed. Larry C. Spears (New York: John Wiley, 1998), 197-208.

words. I have elsewhere²³ developed *martyria* as the joining of divinization and humanization through an examination of the leadership of Richard Wurmbrand, whose writings and example provide a model of Christian presence based on martyrological concepts. Though unknown to most Western Christians, except in its variant “martyr,” *martyria* and cognates are terms common to the New Testament, where they have several meanings associated with the witness theme.²⁴ For the purposes of this paper I am most interested in the way this word cluster is used by Luke, once in his own gospel and throughout the Acts; John in his gospel and in the Apocalypse; and Peter in his first epistle. As developed in these scriptures, the term “*martyria*” and its cognate *martyr* denote the act of Christian public proclamation and witness that has the following characteristics.

First, as developed by Luke in his gospel (24:48) and in the Acts of the Apostles, *martyria*, the witness of the believer to Jesus, becomes the property of the wider church and is no longer limited to the apostolate. That is, witness to the truth is extended beyond the circle of those who had known Jesus first-hand to those who came into the church later and who may never have seen or heard Jesus. This is true in the case of Paul, but a host of others such as Stephen, Aquila, Priscilla, Apollos, and Timothy in the early church who had no personal knowledge of Jesus who became witnesses to him in addition to the apostles.

Second, *martyria* is self-referential in its nature, meaning that just as Jesus’ witness was to himself, so the testimony of the early church was to its own experience of Jesus.²⁵ Numerous times Paul used his experience on the Road to Damascus as the substance of his testimony.²⁶ Yes, he was testifying of the saving work of Christ, but he was doing so in the framework of his own conversion.

Third, in Luke’s use of the term “*martyria*,” the meaning of the word changes from a witness to the historic facticity of Jesus’ saving work to a witness regarding the significance of that work. Unlike the previous point, which stressed the self-referential nature of the witness, here the stress is on the public “application” of the witness. The witness no longer merely tells his or her own story or personal testimony, as it were. He or she no longer imagines that such an act alone is the witnessing act. Instead, the witness is widening and turning outward on the hearers. Self-witness was never an end in itself, any more than it was for Jesus. This aspect of witness was intended to bring *krisis* into the experience of the hearer that would lead to conversion.²⁷ One of the most graphic examples of this is Peter’s sermon to the Jerusalem crowd on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-40). Peter recounts in v. 32 that he and others are “witnesses” to the resurrection of Jesus Christ; this is followed with a call to repentance and baptism.

Fourth, *martyria* refers to a very specific kind of witness, one that is done publicly. Though *martyria* is extended to the whole church in the Acts of the Apostles, it is an activity carried on only by those who publicly testify to the saving work of Jesus

²³ Jack W. Niewold, *Incarnational Leadership*.

²⁴ The following section on *martyria* is largely drawn from H. Strathmann, “Martyr, etc.” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. IV, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 474-514.

²⁵ J. C. Hindley, “Witness in the Fourth Gospel,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 18 (1965): 319-337.

²⁶ Paul’s conversion, recounted in Acts 9:1-19, is referred to twice in Paul’s preaching in Acts (22:4ff., 26:12ff.) and four times in his epistles (Gal 1:15, 16; I Cor 9:1, 15:8; 2 Cor 4:6).

²⁷ Hindley, “Witness in the Fourth Gospel,” 322.

and who thereby suffer and in some instances die for this activity. Not all of those who suffer or die for what they believe are referred to as martyrs, but only those who do so in the act of publicly testifying to the significance of Jesus Christ.²⁸ This meaning of *martyria* is especially prominent in the Apocalypse. Indeed, *martyria* need not necessarily entail death at all, as passages in both 1 Pet (5:1) and the Apocalypse (19:10) show, though it does entail public witness.

Fifth, *martyria* seems to undergo a transformation through the New Testament from signifying a discrete act of witnessing, in earlier instances, to the portrayal of a lifestyle of habitual witnessing (and suffering). This is certainly the intent of 1 Pet 5:1, and John carries it further in the Apocalypse.²⁹ From being an instance of oral testimony that still retains the legal overtones of the non-Johannine gospels, the word “cluster,” and especially the term “*martyria*,” increasingly take on the sense of a vocational habitude. It is in this sense that a human life could be considered a life of *martyria* that the term is especially useful in the present context. Furthermore, because *martyria* is, by nature, *oral proclamation that results in crisis*, it is much more closely tied with the actual content of the gospel. Martyrological Christian presence, we may say, was a highly focused semiotic event. After all, a way of life that often entailed the suffering or death of the subject, precisely because of the public and oral nature of the proclamation, was one that was unlikely to be marked by ambiguity.

As I have attempted to show, *martyria* rests upon the base of a strong Christology and its complement, a robust theology of the human. The classical and pleromatic emphases, when brought together with their Latin and kenotic counterparts, give us a more vigorous understanding of Jesus’ nature. When this understanding is linked with the theologically developed picture of the human that we gain through divinization and humanization, we can begin to understand what *martyria* may have looked like in the early church. In his first epistle, Peter (5:1) links his career as a witness with participating in the sufferings and the glory of the Lord. This is identification with Christ at a more profound level than that implied in his being an eyewitness of the crucifixion, shattering as that must have been. Moreover, Peter’s formulation is perhaps as close as the New Testament comes in linking the experience of divinization with the vocation of witness. It is difficult to imagine that the early witnesses could have carried on their work had they not both believed in and experienced some sense of sharing in the divine nature, an insight I gained in my study of Wurmbrand. The early church seemed much more attuned to this than we today. “He [Christ] assumed a created human body,” writes Athanasius, “that, having renewed it as its creator, he might deify it in himself, and thus bring us all into the kingdom of heaven through our likeness to him.”³⁰ By looking at leadership as participation in the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ—a vocation Peter calls *martys*—we can also regain the insight of the early church that witness is the very heart of leadership. In the passage under review, Peter goes on to claim in vv. 2-3, that his participation in Christ, his *martyria*, is a basis for his

²⁸ On the view that it is not death that makes a martyr, but a specific kind of witness, see Strathmann, “Martyr, etc.,” 495, and George Dragas, “Martyrdom and Orthodoxy in the New Testament: The Theme of *Martyria* as Witness to the Truth,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 30 (1985): 287-296.

²⁹ Strathmann, “Martyr, etc.,” 502.

³⁰ Henry Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers: A Selection from the Writings of the Fathers from St. Clement of Rome to St. Athanasius* (London: Oxford, 1969), 293.

claim to be a “presbyter,” a leader. In fact, in the biblical record it seems as though martyrria is one of the earliest ideas of leadership, although, of course, a global concept of modern leadership, apart from its many roles, was as yet unformulated.

It is for these reasons that I propose the use of martyrria as a central theme in the theoretical formulation of Christian leadership. Indeed, as Glasson³¹ has held, martyrria is the preferred term to use when referring to the content of the proclamation as well as the act of proclaiming the Christian gospel. Martyrria is, Glasson stated, a better concept than the much-used theological term *kerygma*, which occurs in the New Testament only six times as “proclamation,” and all of these are in the Pauline epistles. The verb and noun forms of martyrria, on the other hand, occur more than six times as often as those associated with *kerygma* and are spread over a much broader scriptural range.

Furthermore, martyrria is a far more comprehensive idea than other popular biblical terms that are commonly used to describe various kinds of leadership. Martyrria as witness may be construed to encompass, as it were, many of the modes and offices of the church as well as the functions of the apostolic ministries. Interestingly enough, however, martyrria did not involve waiting on tables or care of the widows (Acts 6:1-7)—important as those acts of mercy were. The temptation came early on to identify the crucial work of public witness with domestic compassion, and this temptation was resisted as outside the more narrow scope of apostolic ministry. But if martyrria is not to be caught up in the daily housekeeping of the believing community, it does seem to involve mission, proclamation, and Christian evangelistic presence per se. As such it can be seen as constitutive of, in one respect or another, prophecy, pastoral ministry, teaching, missionizing, and evangelism. Again, however, though martyrria is a broad and protean concept, it is not open-ended. Where there is public, intentional proclamation of Jesus Christ to the world, but only then, martyrria seems to be present. This proclamatory work may apparently be done in any number of ways, making martyrria a flexible concept. Yet it is not synonymous with any one role, office, or gift.

Finally, we must address the question of how martyrria is to be understood in its relationship to modern Western leadership in general, and ministry in particular. Let me speculate for a moment here. If the divinizing and humanizing impulses described above are perceived as legitimate spiritual and psychological objects of faith, the humble believer who prayerfully apprehends them can scarcely remain unchanged. These divine charismata will represent, at a minimum, the infusion of metaphysical seriousness into one’s consciousness and work, whatever that work may be. When kept together, they seem to provide a distinct evangelical ethos that I perceived in Wurmbrand’s life and work. Divinization alone tends to mysticism and hyperspirituality, while humanization alone has led, as we have seen, in the direction of a secularized and worldly Christian presence. Together, however, the two offer the possibility of deeply grounded, worldly-wise witness. That this may have broad application in the fields of ministry and leadership is the point I am attempting to make, and it is here, I believe, that we can forge a relationship between martyrria and Christian ministry and work. Obviously, much more work needs to be done concerning this.

³¹ T. Francis Glasson, “Kerygma or Martyrria?,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 22 (1969): 90-95.

VIII: The Meaning of Martyria Today

It is my argument that in the present historical era, martyriological leadership results from the apperception of biblical divinization and humanization on the part of the historical actor. I am not asserting that this is necessarily the only formula for biblical living and leading. Other leadership motifs have served their hour, and others may continue to do so in the future. The church lives in a series of *kairoi*, “moments,” that together make up the *aion*, “age,” of her history. Each *kairos* demands a certain type of leadership. In times of cultural Christianity, for instance, the prophetic role comes to the fore, with leaders calling the church away from its love affair with what Luther contemptuously called *Theologia Gloriae*, the perennial attempt to accommodate the gospel to a regnant spirit of the times. In times of great persecution, on the other hand, Christian leadership has assumed such forms as the pilgrim and the shepherd-protector. Given the times in which we live, a period of post-Christian secularism that is not yet quite openly anti-Christian, the martyriological model of Christian leadership seems, to me at least, the ideal leadership style. Ours is a transitional historical moment when the church of the West is marginalized, and the delegitimation of public Christianity looms on the horizon as a distinct possibility.

But what does martyria look like, beyond its general character of public, specific witness to Jesus Christ? Certainly, one can say that the historical disposition I am calling martyria will take many forms. Yet at its core will be an identifiable stance over against culture, a stance drawn from its grounding in confessional witness. Unlike the “lifestyle” postures that Christians have adopted in recent decades, including the servant orientation, martyria will retain at its center the genius of oral, public witness. Beyond that, let me briefly enumerate a number of broad historical components that characterize the present era and suggest ways in which martyria addresses them.

As I have said, we live in a period whose primary characteristic of uncompromising secularism tends to marginalize those who espouse public faith. It is not so much that the life of faith is openly mocked and run out of the market place; rather, we find our commitment relegated to the margins of life, while the processes of modernity that “really matter,” such as work, business, entertainment, and social exchanges, seem to occur according to their own secular mandates. Attempts to bring Christian witness into the center of secular life invoke sanctions, some of which are by now woven deeply into the fabric of contemporary social mores. Though open hostility is present from time to time, it is more likely that the zealous Christian will be faced with subtle hints that he or she is upsetting the delicate conventions of diversity. That alone is often enough to silence all but the most determined Christian.

If Christian faith has been pushed to the margins of society in the West, the center is occupied by relativism and subjectivism. So much has been written on this that it is unnecessary to belabor the subject. What does need to be mentioned here, however, is that these cultural currents are now part of the church’s experience as well. We have all read the statistics of sexual compromise, theological confusion, and what used to be called carnality within the walls of evangelicalism. At least half of Christian teenagers

lose their faith upon entering college, and even seminary students are often unsure of their spiritual grounding.³²

These are some of the dominant trends in the affluent West that are affecting the church. But there is another world-historical trend occurring in our time, one not subject to the currents of secularism and subjectivity. This is the megatrend that missiologists and writers such as Lamin Sanneh, Andrew Walls, and Philip Jenkins³³ call “southern” Christianity. The rise of Southern Christianity is really a number of movements that, when taken together, comprise a demographic *coup de main* of incalculable proportions. One thing seems certain: if demographic trends in Africa, Latin America, and Asia continue as they have, the post-Christian West will soon give way to post-Western Christianity.³⁴ Even when one factors in the persistence of religious, even evangelical, activity in North America, the center of gravity for the world Christian movement is shifting inexorably to the south. Birth rates alone would indicate that Western (European, Australian, and American) Christianity is waning in terms of its influence in the greater context of world Christianity.

But it is not a question of mere demographics; Western Christianity is increasingly seen as an expression of its culture by virtue of the very interests and pursuits close to its heart. Internally, much that the Western church spends its time and treasure doing, including some of its theological and academic endeavors, would seem strange and irrelevant to the eighty percent of world Christians who are associated with the South. Externally, biblical Christianity is viewed as an alien and unwelcome presence among secular elites of our own culture. Western evangelicalism, in spite of its energy and intellectual accomplishments, still finds itself to be just one more curiosity among others when viewed from the center of the vast, amorphous, relativizing entity we know as popular culture.³⁵ Thus, even at home, leisured Western Christianity is often confused, self-obsessed, and theologically parochial, on the one hand, while regarded as an irrelevant cult by its host society, on the other.

Southern Christianity, however, is a much more dynamic presence in its various situations. In some regions it is ascendant as a cultural force, as in central Africa and Latin America, while in others it suffers for its public witness, as in northern Africa, India, China, and parts of southeast Asia. The church of the South is marked by brownness, blackness, poverty, and supernaturalism. In general, it leads the life of martyrdom daily. This is, in the words of Jenkins quoting C. S. Lewis, “thick” religion, as opposed to the

³² On the religious thinking of young people today, see Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³³ See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (New York: Oxford, 2002); Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 2003 and Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis), 1996.

³⁴ The quote to the effect that “the post-Christian west is giving way to post-western Christianity” is commonly ascribed to Lamin Sanneh, but I have not yet found it in reading his materials.

³⁵ Many commentators have argued in recent years, contra the notion that the west is becoming increasingly secularized, that America is more religious than ever. I contend that the Christianity of America, in both its evangelical and liberal iterations, is often shallow and ineffective in its relationship with our secular culture. Contemporary American Christianity seems to me more and more “cultic” (defined by inner spirituality rather than outward influence) and shoved to the margins, and its numerical strength has little impact on the general direction of culture. See, e.g., Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

“clear” religion of the global “north.”³⁶ It is in the broad tableau of Southern Christianity that we may be able to discern the face of martyriological witness and leadership most clearly.

We may need to learn from third-world Christians techniques for surviving in hostile social climates, while opening ourselves to the moral and spiritual renewal their experience may offer us. The martyriological model may also encourage a countercultural posture toward secularism in the West just as it trains the mind for perseverance in the face of persecution in the South. Martyria, furthermore, takes seriously the demonic in much of modernity, making spiritual warfare a central responsibility of the leader. I do not believe servant leadership is capable of confronting such exigencies, bound as it is to a certain understanding of modern rationalism and to institutions specific to the educated West. Something more robust will be required in the decades to come.

IX: The Rehabilitation of the Servant Motif

Having stated the above reservations concerning servant leadership, let me attempt to put the servant theme back on firm ground. Earlier I argued that the servant motif finds its proper home within the Christological category I have called humanization. This is not the only doctrinal home for servanthood, since the servant role also appears across the other Christological categories already discussed. However, insofar as servanthood is understood as an aspect of leadership, it falls properly under the anthropological dimension of the incarnation, most specifically humanization. Traditionally, servant leadership has been associated closely with the doctrine of kenosis, an association that, as we have seen, leads to attempts to imitate what is perceived to be the humble Jesus, with many attendant distortions for both Christology and humanity. Of course, we find a wide range of references to the servant in the New Testament. Jesus calls himself servant, one who came not to be served, but to serve (Mk 10:45). Believers are called servants at many points through the scriptures (i.e., Matt 10:24, 20:27, 25:21; John 15:15; Rom 1:1, 16:1; 1 Cor 9:19; Gal 1:10; Col 4:12; 2 Tim 2:24; Heb 3:5; 2 Pet 1:1; Jude 1—to cite only a few). There is not space here to develop the various meanings of servanthood in the New Testament or even the diverse biblical terms that we translate “servant.” Suffice it to say that servanthood is part of the biblical composites we know as leadership and discipleship; there is no denying this fact. Yet what we have seen happen in the widespread adoption of the servant model is the elevation of a role to the place of a calling, and it is this that I have endeavored to critique. One who views the evangelical world today may be excused for concluding that the servant motif has eclipsed the older and more primary callings of the Christian as disciple and witness, in practice if not in theory. Many have “neglected the Word of God in order to wait on tables” (Acts 6:2), reducing the gospel to ethical considerations.

It is significant, as Mather³⁷ argued some years ago, that Paul was appointed to be a servant when he was called to be a witness (Acts 26:16-18), but that the servant role was understood in terms of the apostolic ministry he was to fulfill. Throughout the

³⁶ Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity* (New York: Oxford, 2006), 192.

³⁷ P. Boyd Mather, “Paul in Acts as ‘Servant’ and ‘Witness,’” *Chicago Society of Biblical Research 30* (1985), 23-44.

Acts, Paul's ministry is presented as both servant (*hupereitais*) and witness (*martys*) in a way that provides, in Mather's argument, a model for Christian living in the new age ushered in by Christ. For our purposes the point is not that the servant role was inferior to the vocation of witness (it is not), but that the two were seen as constituting a whole. That is, servanthood is a biblically sound Christian role and has been from the beginning, because it has always been associated closely with martyrdom or other missional concepts. That is, servanthood is not intended to stand alone as a vocational possibility for Christians and certainly not as the paradigmatic form it has assumed in recent years. Martyriological leadership will doubtless encompass much servitude and will not exist apart from it, but it will not be defined by it. This is a critical perspective to keep in mind as we go forward, since it is not in anyone's interest to denigrate the nobility of Christian servanthood. Rather, it is my intent to restore servanthood to the position as adjunct to the calling of witness, without servanthood usurping the place of witness, or substituting for it, as seems to have happened since the 1970s. It is precisely in the context of Christian proclamation that servanthood can reclaim its rightful biblical place. It is there that the servant will partake in the redemptive work of Christ on earth.

X: Summary and Conclusion

Beginning with a discussion of weaknesses in the servant leadership paradigm from a pragmatic point of view, I progressed toward a theological examination of servant leadership. I suggested that servant leadership has influenced evangelicalism's understanding of Jesus. Using aspects of the doctrine of the incarnation to indicate the components of a full Christology, I attempted to provide a sketch of contemporary evangelicalism, which seems lacking in some of these components, particularly the pleromatic view of Christ's assumption of flesh and the classic view of the atonement. I looked at a third Christological component, anthropology, to indicate that the modern evangelical Jesus, and the church as his body, fail to actualize two attributes: divinization and humanization. Since servant leadership is a reflection, at least in its Christian version, of contemporary Christology, I found servant leadership theologically vacuous and therefore inadequate as a Christian theory of leadership.

I then endeavored to ground Christian leadership in a Christology that retained all of the above aspects and in the process identified such a model of leadership as martyrdom. I suggested that martyrdom be subsumed under the humanization pole of christological anthropology in order to give it a historical and social character. I then tentatively laid out some ways in which martyrdom, or witness-based leadership, might express itself in the present world situation. Once I concluded that discussion, I relocated servanthood within the context of martyrdom, where, I believe, it finds its true home.

There are of course many other things one can say concerning martyrdom as a way of leadership. As I remarked earlier, perhaps one of the most urgent questions going forth will concern the appearance of martyrdom in the business or corporate setting. It is one thing to question the adequacy of servant leadership, but quite another to prescribe something more rarified, such as martyrdom, as its replacement. Can there be a "secularized" version of martyrdom that will be accepted in the contemporary marketplace,

yet which does not surrender its evangelical nature? Is martyria able to be translated into the language of the postmodern world, or is it destined to provide a theory only for pastors, church workers, missionaries, writers, and evangelists? Given the nature of contemporary social mores, will martyria be any more successful than older leadership styles that attempted to subjugate witness to social or interpersonal ethics? Some will no doubt argue that at the end of the day the only form of Christian presence we can hope to demonstrate in the secular business world today is something that resembles the abstract spirituality of servant leadership. I believe that this need not be the case. Witness and service are not exclusive of one another but complementary. It is when service is understood to be witness per se that Christian leadership is devitalized. Witness-based leadership, on the other hand, will retain servanthood near its center, but it will not confuse acts of kindness or interpersonal competencies with the work to which we are called as Christian leaders.

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