

THE *DESIGNATED READER*:
AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL METAPHOR FOR PASTORAL LEADERSHIP¹
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To paraphrase the dilemma reported by the German novelist, Thomas Mann, a writer is someone for whom writing proves to be *more difficult* than it is for other people. Presumably Mann had in mind the myriad creative obstacles to writing *well* rather than the physical challenge of successfully manipulating a computer keyboard or fountain pen and legal pad. But perhaps his wry observation also suggests a predicament familiar to many working pastors. For in recognizing the occasional distance many pastors attempt to navigate between stated ecclesiological commitments and vocational responsibilities, some may be tempted to abandon any pretense of theological rigor and integrity. Under pressure to find “something that will work” in this task of leading a congregation (which may often seem like an exercise in herding cats), who could blame the pastor for casting jealous eyes toward more authoritarian or even manipulative leadership strategies? But keeping ordination vows in mind, maybe such tempted ministers will instead confess like Mann that learning to be a truly pastoral leader is a journey by which leadership becomes more difficult than it is for other people.

Consider for instance, the recent “Statement of Ecclesiology” offered within the “Nazarene Future Report” as an implied job description for those who serve as elders in the Church of the Nazarene: “Elders are ordained to shape the body of Christ through preaching the gospel, administering the sacraments, nurturing the people in worship and *ordering congregational life* [italics mine].”² It might easily be assumed that most elders would be able to offer articulate descriptions of the first three ministerial actions named.

¹Dr. Brent Strawn of Emory University first pointed out to me the image of an idealized Israelite king as “the designated reader” while discussing the “Kingship Law” (Deut. 17:14-20). This paper will consider that passage and its image as an ecclesiological metaphor for the essential work of a pastor. But please understand that I am not suggesting any necessary correlation of gender between pastors and *kings!*

²Board of General Superintendents, Church of the Nazarene, “Nazarene Future Report: A Sustainable System of Global Mission” – Statement of Ecclesiology”; denominational records available at <http://nazarene.org/files/docs/BGS%20NAZARENE%20FUTURE%20REPORT%20February%202013%20-%20English.pdf>; Internet; accessed 11 June, 2013.

After all, what part of our “body life” is more routinely on display than these practices of Christian ministry performed through the preaching, sacramental observances, and public celebration of congregational worship? But how are pastors to understand and explain the fourth expectation that elders will nurture the body of Christ by ordering congregational life? One suspects that for at least some elders of the Church, this fourth imperative might easily be something of an “unfunded mandate” for which pastors may lack a cogent and coherent theological rationale. And in the absence of such ecclesiological underpinnings, is it hard to imagine that a primary point of emphasis for too many pastors degenerates into considerations of ministerial *technique*? How odd it would be for Wesley’s heirs to devalue their birthright by devoting so much attention to pastoral techniques and methods at the expense of deeper commitments required for the formation of Christlike character evidenced by the holy *tempers* Wesley often described.

In speaking about ecclesial roles in a culture with apparently limitless energy and appetite for developing methods and technologies, we should probably affirm that our pastors are an extremely inventive group who seem quite capable of ordering and re-ordering congregational life through the application of allegedly cutting-edge spiritual knowledge and ministry techniques. So with truly impressive predictability, wave after wave of these attractively packaged religious goods and services wash over and into our congregations. But after riding the tide of an endless succession of congregational emphases, our pastors and laypeople may be forgiven for growing skeptical regarding the latest promise that the Kingdom will come in its fullness just as soon as everybody signs up for the class and buys a hardback copy of *The DaVinci-Purpose-Driven-Left-Behind-Prayer-Shack-Of-Jabez*.³ One suspects (and hopes) that congregations are now waiting

³I am critiquing the way the discipleship agenda of many North American congregations is easily hijacked by the well-financed mass marketing of religious books, films, and other multi-media productions purporting to strengthen credentials regarding the “cultural relevance” of our ministry. One may also argue that North American evangelical church life is dominated by the outsized influence of *megachurches* which exploit *zeitgeist* trends, amplifying the effectiveness of such marketing campaigns. For reviews regarding the relevance and impact of megachurches, see Scott L. Thumma, “The Kingdom, The Power, and the Glory: The Megachurch in Modern American Society” (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1996); and Nancy L. Eiesland, *A Particular Place: Urban Restructuring and Religious Ecology in a Southern Exurb* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000). For discussions of these dynamics in the

for something deeper and more substantial than a diet of so-called Gospel “sweetmeats”⁴ that appears at least partially responsible for the alarming rise of Attention-Deficit-Disordered congregations littering North America.⁵

To the degree I am correct in my hunch that many pastors discern a gap between their responsibilities and the available resources of their *functional ecclesiology*, we can anticipate a common response to any sense of inadequacy in their ministerial role. Often we respond with practical theology resources heavily devoted to the development of more effective ministry *techniques*. But such pastoral self-help materials also demonstrate what Heifetz described as *technical* rather than *adaptive* work.⁶ Reflecting upon the “technical work” evident during his ministerial career; Willimon described the shortcomings of this approach:

Technical work Heifetz defined as the search for the right application of technique to solve known problems – our earlier application of the insights of the church growth movement (which I eagerly and rather naively applied to my inner-city parish in the early 1980s), congregational transformation (those workshops that I led in churches during the late 1980s), and leadership development (district seminars helping clergy retool their skills to lead in the 1990s). For all the good in these efforts . . . they didn’t get us all the way to where we wanted to go.

most influential North American megachurch, see Kimon Howland Sergeant, “Willow Creek and the Future of Evangelicalism” (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1996); Gregory A. Pritchard, “The Strategy of Willow Creek Community Church: A Study in the Sociology of Religion” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1994); and James Mellado, “Willow Creek Community Church” (1991 case study for Harvard Business School prepared under the supervision of Professor Leonard A. Schlesinger, revised 23 February, 1999), Harvard Business School Publishing, Boston.

⁴For the origin of this “sweetmeats” analogy, readers are referred to John Wesley, *Letter on Preaching Christ*, London; 20 December, 1751. For further comment on this correspondence and its significance for the developing Methodist societies, see Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 185.

⁵ A perceptive treatment of the disaster resulting from this kind of congregational over-stimulation comes from novelist George Bernard Shaw, whose young priest and narrator comments that his parish is “bored stiff” but always “on the go.” See Georges Bernard Shaw, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, trans. Pamela Morris (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1983), 1-2.

⁶See Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); and Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2009).

More than problem solving and platitudes, we needed conversion of beliefs and assumptions. I love technical work because it focuses upon action. But now – if what was needed was a change of beliefs and assumptions – more than a commander, I needed to be a more curious learner, a constant questioner, and a creative teacher. That’s what Heifetz calls “adaptive work” – helping an organization adapt to its environment on the basis of its purposes and values by facing the painful realities and then mobilizing new attitudes and behaviors. . . . *Adaptive change is deep change because it aims at the modification of an organization’s culture rather than discarding a few of its practices* [italics mine].⁷

Reading Willimon’s assessment, it is sobering to think of the implications for any tradition emphasizing primarily technical approaches to ecclesiology and leadership. In my North American context, this approach can be particularly dangerous given cultural preferences for leadership models focusing upon “expert resources” of managerial competency. With the “Jesus CEO” as a dominant Christological image, someone asked recently “what is to prevent the capitalistic, consumer-oriented church from desiring and selecting a minister to function partly as buoyant master of ceremonies and entertainer and partly as Wal-Mart style manager and motivator?”⁸ At the risk of provoking a minor theological fistfight among my leadership peers, the shortest answer may be that there is little within the functional ecclesiology of many pastors to avoid such an outcome. Yet warnings from other professions make it obvious that reliance on purely technical approaches is inadequate given the complexity of adaptive challenges that defy solutions of technique. In a Harvard Medical School commencement address, surgeon Atul Gawande described the changing face of modern medical practice in which doctors can no longer mentally retain all necessary information or master every skill needed to care effectively for patients. He went on to observe that “we train, hire, and pay doctors to be [solitary, autonomous] cowboys . . . [when it is high-functioning and interdependent auto racing] pit crews people need” when entering the hospital:

[You need an essential skill] that you must have but haven’t been taught – the ability to implement at scale, the ability to get colleagues along the entire chain of

⁷William H. Willimon, *Bishop: The Art of Questioning Authority by an Authority in Question* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 130.

⁸André Resner, Jr., “Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A – Second Lesson: 1 Corinthians 4:1-5,” *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday’s Texts, vol. 2, Acts and the Epistles*, Roger E. Van Harn, ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 179.

care functioning like pit crews for patients. There is resistance, sometime vehement resistance, to the efforts that make it possible. Partly, it is because the work is rooted in different values than the ones we've had. They include *humility* [italics mine], an understanding that no matter who you are, how experienced or smart, you will fail.⁹

Taking seriously these cautionary warnings, it is this essential note of humility highlighted by Gawande that I want to push forward as the dominant concern for the remainder of this paper. Drawing again from earlier distinctions between the technical and adaptive work of the leader outlined by Heifetz,¹⁰ let me suggest that our pastors need a new ecclesiological metaphor to guide them through the bewildering array of congregational choices clamoring for attention and allegiance.¹¹ But I suspect that a truly helpful metaphor will also exert an ecclesiological counterbalance, namely an appropriate sense of pastoral restraint in addressing the challenges to be faced by leaders responsible to faithfully order congregational life. For it is the humility of effective leaders, the recognition of our propensity for hubris and overreaching that we often seem to miss when assuming that the pastor is by virtue of ordination endowed with the *Spiritual Gift of Immaculate Perception*. Knowing this, I am looking to the Scriptures to find a metaphor describing that Christlike character representative of the holiness emphasis we

⁹Atul Gawande, "Cowboys and Pit Crews," *The New Yorker* (26 May, 2011); available online at <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2011/05/atul-gawande-harvard-medical-school-commencement-address.html>; Internet; accessed 11 June, 2013.

¹⁰For a concise discussion distinguishing between adaptive and technical work, see Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, 73-76.

¹¹The problem for many ministers is not that we lack methods and techniques that we might like to try within our congregations, *but that the sources of ecclesiological authority for discernment and implementation within our ministries are often impoverished*. As a result, the concentration of power that occurs as our churches grow larger (and as our pastoral tenures lengthen) makes it easier to accomplish almost anything we can imagine *even if we should not!* For a discussion of sociological dynamics as congregations become *functionally diffuse* instead of *functionally specific*, particularly within North American churches, see R. Stephen Warner, *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Evangelicals and Liberals in a Small-Town Church* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 63. Warner notes that as churches grow functionally diffuse, the burden of proof falls upon those who would exclude a potential activity as illegitimate since the institution "will tend to absorb activities that are feasible given available resources." We might call such results the *metastases* of ill-advised technical work.

profess to admire in our pastors. But I am also struck by the fact that we do not always affirm those embodying the costly, cruciform values we espouse. As David Brooks notes:

[When] you read a biography of someone you admire, it's rarely the things that made them happy that compel your admiration. *It's the things they did to court unhappiness* – the things they did that were arduous and miserable, which sometimes cost them friends and aroused hatred. It's excellence, not happiness that we admire most. . . . *Doing your job well often means suppressing yourself.* . . . Most of us are egotistical and most are self-concerned most of the time, but it's nonetheless true that life comes to a point only in those moments when the self dissolves into some task. *The purpose in life is not to find yourself. It's to lose yourself* [all italics mine].¹²

Assuming that Brooks is right, is it too much for us to hope for a Biblical metaphor which might help us focus and sustain our attention upon the cultivation of a leader's character?

Let me propose one such candidate for our consideration: the so-called “Kingship Law” narrated in Deut. 17:14-20. Although this text has often become a lightning rod for scholarly debate, the apparent function of its location within the larger literary structure of Deuteronomy has been helpfully explained by Lohfink and McBride as a “statement of polity” regarding Israel's divided powers of governance.¹³ Many scholars also notice “the explicit literary structure of the book . . . [and] its self-presentation as a series of Mosaic speeches” given the insertion of four “editorial superscriptions” (1:1-5; 4:44-49; 29:1; 33:1).¹⁴ But Olson also thinks that the literary sequence of Deuteronomy 12-26 perhaps follows the order of the Decalogue, offering a meditation on the limits of human power:

¹²David Brooks, “It's Not About You,” *The New York Times*, 30 May, 2011; available at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/opinion/31brooks.html?_r=0; Internet; accessed 11 June, 2013.

¹³See Norbert Lohfink, “Distribution of the Functions of Power: The Laws Concerning Public Offices in Deuteronomy 16:18-18:22” and S. Dean McBride, Jr., “Polity of the Covenant People: The Book of Deuteronomy” in *A Song of Power and the Power of Song: Essays on the Book of Deuteronomy*, ed. Duane L. Christensen, vol. 3 of *Sources for Biblical and Theological Study* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1993), 336-354 and 62-77.

¹⁴Patrick D. Miller, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 10. As Miller explains elsewhere, the presentation of Deuteronomy as a “speech event” ostensibly voiced by Moses carries great importance for interpreters of the text: “The introductory verses of the book, reinforced constantly by the rest of the chapters, say in effect to readers of any time: Read these words as the Lord's instruction taught and explained by the prophet Moses, *and you will know what force and authority they are to*

The statutes and ordinances of 16:18-18:22 share with the commandment honoring parents a basic set of values concerning the role and purpose of authority, whether exercised in a smaller family context (5:16) or in a larger community or national context (16:18-18:22). In ancient Israel, parents were primary holders of authority within the family context and warranted honor and respect. But parents were not gods, and they were not to be worshiped . . . The primary thrust of the *commandment* concerning parents is that authorities are to be honored. The primary thrust of the *statutes and ordinances* that explicate the parents commandment is that authorities are to be worthy of the honor they receive. Leadership brings responsibilities. Deuteronomy thus moves beyond what ethicist Paul Lehman describes as the false opposition between hierarchy and equality to a model of “reciprocal responsibility” involving both those who hold authority and those who are led.¹⁵

Now it is precisely this apparent modesty and humility regarding the exercise of human power which is envisioned by this call for reciprocal responsibility that highlights the most obvious and surprising characteristic of the Kingship Law. As Crüsemann notes, within the neighborhood of the ancient Near East a monarch was routinely understood to mediate between the earthly and heavenly realms, and Israel “generally participated in this view” as we see in the royal psalms.¹⁶ However, something quite different is in view within the Kingship Law. Grant comments that while Israel was not alone in offering written advice to the reigning monarch, the Law of the King remains extraordinary in the

have [italics mine].” See Patrick D. Miller, “‘Moses My Servant’: The Deuteronomic Portrait of Moses” in *A Song of Power and the Power of Song*, 307.

¹⁵Dennis T. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 80-81. For a more modest appraisal of this perceived correspondence, see also Georg Braulik, “The Sequence of the Laws in Deuteronomy 12-26 and in the Decalogue” in *A Song of Power and the Power of Song*, 321.

¹⁶Frank Crüsemann, *The Torah: Theology and Social History of Old Testament Law*, trans. Allen W. Mahnke (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 234. For a review of how these royal expectations line up with the immediate context of the ancient Near East, see Ronald E. Clements, “The Book of Deuteronomy” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 426; and Gary N. Knoppers, “The Deuteronomist and the Deuteronomic Law of the King: A Reexamination of a Relationship,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* vol. 108, no. 3 (1996), 329. In addition, six features of the royal ideology shared by Israel and its neighbors across the ancient Near East are outlined in Bernard M. Levinson, “The Reconceptualization of Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History’s Transformation of Torah,” *Vetus Testamentum* vol. 51, no. 4 (2001), 511-534.

context of the ancient Near East in that “we find no other ancient texts which seek to limit the power of the king in this way.”¹⁷ Levinson’s evaluation summarizes the text:

[The] paragraph devoted to the king [suppresses] just those royal attributes that arguably represented the monarch’s greatest source of dignity. Indeed, the depiction of the functions of the king in this unit serves far more to hamstring him than to permit him to exercise any meaningful authority whatsoever. After the introductory specification that the king should not be a foreigner (vv. 14-15), five prohibitions specify what the king should *not* do (vv. 16-17). There remains for the king but a single positive duty: while sitting demurely on his throne to “read each day of his life” from the very Torah scroll that delimits his powers (vv. 18-20).¹⁸

And Knoppers concludes in very similar fashion by noting that apart from the obligation to be what I have termed *The Designated Reader*, this Law of the King “contains only restrictions on the monarchy and monarchical power, disqualifying non-Israelites from holding this office and limiting the number of a king’s horses, the number of his wives, and the amount of his wealth.”¹⁹

What exactly is the point of this perspective on Israel’s monarchy? Given that the introductory rationale for seeking a king effectively denies the distinctive identity of the people of Israel (in that they are making the potentially dubious request to be like those peoples who live around them),²⁰ it is easy to discern an implicit critique of royal power and prerogatives within the text.²¹ But explaining these criticisms regarding the standard operating procedures of Israel’s kings, Grant quotes Christopher J. H. Wright:

¹⁷Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy’s Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 192.

¹⁸Bernard M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 141.

¹⁹Knoppers, “The Deuteronomist and the Deuteronomic Law of the King,” 330-331.

²⁰For evaluations of the worrisome nature of this request for a king, see David M. Howard, “The Case for Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Former Prophets,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 52, no. 1 (Spring, 1990), 107; and Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, trans. Dorothea Barton (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), 118-120.

²¹See for instance J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 205; J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 293; and Mark E. Biddle, *Deuteronomy* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys Publishing, 2003), 289.

These three restrictions (vv 16f.) are remarkable because they quite explicitly cut across the accepted pattern of kingship throughout the ancient Near East. Military power, through the building up of a large chariot force (the point of having great numbers of horses), the prestige of a large harem of many wives (frequently related to international marriage alliances), and the enjoyment of great wealth (large amounts of silver and gold) – these were the defining marks of kings worthy of the title. Weapons, women, and wealth: why else be a king?²²

As Grant makes clear in balancing the presumably negative rationale of Israel's request for a king against the affirmation that Israel is nonetheless free to have the king who has been *chosen* by Yahweh, this text is not really focused on whether or not there is any real point for a king to exist. The crucial question of the text is rather, "What should Israel's king be like?"²³ Seeing that the only positive command of the Kingship Law envisions the monarch internalizing Torah on a daily basis as *The Designated Reader* just as the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4-9) previously called for all to be engaged in uninterrupted, daily listening before God, Nelson draws an elegant conclusion: "The king becomes the ideal citizen, a model Israelite, more a student of the law than a ruler."²⁴ He is now the one who embodies absolute dependence upon God by refusing to be self-deceived by the accoutrements of concentrated human power. Serving as *The Designated Reader*, the king becomes a public and visible reminder of the trust and piety to which all his subjects are called. Grant concludes:

It is a powerful image of one who is committed to do more than learn from his "assigned text" – he seeks to shape and form his whole life and outlook based around that text. Torah, according to Deut. 17:14-20, is vital to the king's vertical and horizontal relationships. If the king is to know the blessing of Yahweh (v 20), he is to live by the torah. If he is to relate properly to his fellows (v 20), he must live by the torah. So we see that the instruction of Yahweh is absolutely essential to every aspect of the king's exercise of monarchic rule. In fact, we can observe a principle of intensification at work here. The king is to be characterized by a typically [Deuteronomistic] attitude towards the torah, reflecting that which is to be expected of all Israelites. According to Deuteronomy, *all of the people* are to absorb the divine instruction into their inner beings so that their lives and attitudes are shaped by it (e.g. Deut. 6:1-9). . . . However, the essence of the kingship law is that the king is expected to do so *all the more* – this is the principle of

²²Grant, *The King as Exemplar*, 201.

²³Ibid., 197.

²⁴Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 222.

intensification. The people are to follow the torah, to keep the torah, not to forget the torah, but the king is to *excel* in these areas.²⁵

Giving attention to these words about a king embodying true *excellence* in serving his constituents as *The Designated Reader* of a book, Eugene Peterson reminds me that “the Hebrew word for Bible is *Miqra*, a noun formed from the verb “to call,” *qara* . . . [the] Bible is not a book to carry around and read for information on God, but a voice to listen to.”²⁶ In fact, I am asserting that this daily reading which is actually a profound and humble *listening* is perhaps an essential ecclesiological restraint which can help save our leaders from themselves. Certainly we can see how Deuteronomy attempts in its Law of the King to curb the avaricious appetites of any monarch tempted to act in ways that are completely consistent with the neighbors but utterly corrosive of covenantal faithfulness. But perhaps our church could also appropriate this image of *The Designated Reader* to reaffirm priorities that value the formation of holy character above mere competency in pastoral technique or method. After all, can we doubt that our pastors may be tempted, like kings, to do whatever seems right in their own eyes when leading the church?

²⁵Grant, *The King as Exemplar*, 207-208.

²⁶Eugene H. Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 33.