



Incarnate Leadership

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Minding the Gap

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14

“Mind the gap, please.”

If you’ve ever traveled on the London Underground, you’re familiar with those words. Ignore them, and you can fall headlong into the space between the platform and train. As leaders, we face a different sort of gap—the gap between the positions we occupy and the needs of those we lead. Some of us ignore the gap. Others of us stumble trying to cross the gap. But in Jesus we find a leader who stepped across the gap. His incarnation bridged the unfathomable chasm between God and sinful humanity. It’s no wonder that as we look at the way Jesus led, we see a leader who was never too distant from his followers.

I’ve heard a lot of Christian leaders describe their leadership style as *incarnational*. You’ve got to admire their nerve. I think I know what they mean, but it’s hard not to picture them snapping their suspenders as they respond to the question, “What’s your leadership style?”

“Incarnational, of course.”

“You mean like God becoming man?”

“Yeah, that’s how I lead. I lead like God.”

We all do a lot of big talking about how close we are to our people. But are we? As much as we try to mind the gap between our positions and the people we lead, the antigravitational pull upward is powerful. Christian leaders are not exempt from the tug.

SEEING BEYOND OURSELVES

Incarnation. Humility. Access. Other-centeredness. John loved these qualities in Jesus. They are at the core of Christlike leadership. But they do not represent the natural curvature of our fallen human condition. Martin Luther was fond of quoting St. Augustine’s description of the human condition as “curved in on ourselves.” I’m pretty sure the average leader’s inward curvature well exceeds that of the general population. Mine does. I do the kind of work that attracts a lot of attention. People are interested in me. My wife says I am especially interested in me. Ouch. I want to be curved outward. I love the people I have been entrusted to lead, but my needs often blind me to their needs. I forget how good it is to be in the midst of my coworkers.

Those of us in leadership positions should give our positions back to the God who chose to stoop, to the God who chose to dwell with his followers. We should do this not only because it is Christlike but because it empowers those we lead. When my board chair steps out of his busy life simply to be with me, it inspires me because I realize he cares about me, not just my job performance. We are image descendants of a God who valued incarnation above all other redemption strategies. Our spiritual DNA moves us toward the magnetic force of leaders who dwell among us.

Recently, I encountered a faculty member who had just returned with twenty-five students from a life-changing experience in Africa. Somehow I failed to remember to ask about his poignant experience.

I did not, however, fail to remember to talk about my stuff and how I was doing. The grace with which he accepted my apology the next day reminded me that the people we lead are often too kind to tell us which way we are curved. If our focus keeps curving in on ourselves, then even when we are in the presence of those we lead, we will not really know them.

We need to ask ourselves the questions that curve toward our people. How much time do we spend with them? Are we eager to be in their presence? Do we make warm inquiries about their lives? What does our “me-them” conversational balance sheet look like? What opportunities are we missing simply to be in the presence of those whom we hope will have confidence in our leadership? I fear too often we fail to look very far beyond ourselves and our to-do lists.

RESISTING THE PEDESTAL

Like many ministry leaders, I am in a line of work that encourages “being above” more than “being with.” When I became a college president in 1986, I went to a conference for new presidents. The leadership guru at the event explained how excessive democratization in higher education had rendered presidential authority impotent. He then urged us to stand tall on the pedestal of our position and stave off the efforts of all who would remove us. Interesting advice. I start a job where I have the highest salary, a free car, a free house, the biggest office, a sizeable travel and entertainment budget, and our employees’ respect for the office I hold. And my instructions for leading? Climb on a pedestal; create more distance from those I’m supposed to lead. In other words, I should grab more of what I already have at the expense of the one thing I don’t have — authentic peer-to-peer relationships.

I didn’t take the pedestal advice. I wish I could say my desire to be Christlike kept my feet on the ground, but my reasons for avoiding the pedestal were more social than spiritual. I just love college students and

I admired our faculty and staff. I didn't feel my role should exempt me from their friendship. I'm sure most pastors and most of us in ministry enter our positions with a deep desire to befriend our congregations and our staffs. But somehow we feel the need to maintain distance. Our people elevate us. We let them do it. And then one day we hear we're out of touch. We begin to wonder if we got put on the pedestal to make us easier targets.

I've come to the conclusion that people try to park us in high places because they think that's where we belong. It's a way of expressing respect. But that's not what they really want. I'm still waiting for a student or staff person to criticize me for being insufficiently aloof. People love to see leaders on their turf. John was no exception. The introduction to his gospel account speaks volumes. If he were doing a newspaper story on Jesus, he would likely open it with the biggest, most ostentatious miracle he could find. Maybe that's what he did. Maybe to John, Jesus' biggest miracle was the first one he saw: God walking around in Galilee. Immanuel. God with us. Astonishing! Miraculous! The best thing imaginable.

Not long ago I talked my wife into renting the movie *Lawrence of Arabia*. (I didn't tell her this epic took an epoch to watch.) My favorite scene in this entire, interminable film is the point at which the Bedouin ruler fully accepts the leadership of an interloping British soldier, T. E. Lawrence. After Lawrence removes his British uniform, wet from an act of heroism, the *sharif* throws it into the fire and presents Lawrence with full Arab regalia. Through this act, the Bedouin ruler ushered Lawrence across the divide of race, culture, and colonialism. Lawrence took on the likeness of the Bedouins he sought to lead—he became Lawrence of Arabia. At a very primal level, we hear incarnation

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echoing from our *imago deo* as the ultimate means of reducing the gap. Ironically, we want to follow our leaders when they come alongside of us more than when they are out in front of us.

THE CHOICE TO DWELL AMONG

But “crossing over” doesn’t just happen. We have to make a deliberate choice. We have to be intentional in resisting the forces that create gaps between ourselves and those we have been called to lead. As I began my career in higher education, a colleague’s sudden departure made me a good choice (actually, the only choice) to fill his leadership role. I did pretty well in the role, so it wasn’t too long before I got bumped again. I was, as they say, moving up. There is nothing unhealthy or insidious about this. You are given an assignment, you do your best, and you get promoted. So far, so good. Except the higher you go, the harder it is to stay connected with those you have been called to lead. At first, this troubles you, but you are comforted by a new set of peers at your elevated level who help you accept the inevitability of distance. Then at some point — who can say exactly when — you lose touch. *This* is insidious.

For some leaders the upward drift is quiet and incremental. I spoke recently at a retreat for business and church leaders from Houston, home to the former Enron Corporation. To a person, those who knew Ken Lay, the late, shamed Enron CEO, considered him a fine human being who allowed himself to get insulated high above his people. He ended up with a gap he never would have imagined, but ultimately it did him in.

Some leaders get stuck on the pedestal by the glue of their own egos. They listen to their sycophants. (King Darius ended up tossing Daniel in the lions’ den when he got suckered into making himself a god.) I’m not suggesting that we relinquish all the perks and privileges that come with leadership. But I do feel our best bet for being Christlike leaders is to bridge the gap, evacuate every pedestal. Would Jesus have