



Integrating Christian Witness

Reflections on

**Grace-Shaped
Leadership**



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**Grace-Shaped
Leadership**

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Grace: The Radical Alternative

Is World Vision settling for too small a vision? Incremental improvements in our faithfulness, in others' quality of life, and in percentages of progress towards the Millennium Development Goals are certainly progress. But I wonder if we're moved forward by something big enough.

Christian leadership is rooted in compelling vision of a radical alternative to what others may accept as normal. This kind of leadership might appear out of step with the present norms, styles and models of effective leadership. It requires constant, prayerful reliance on the love and power of God, as we pursue together with joy and passion the new life found in God's coming kingdom. The goal is nothing less than for us here on earth to participate in God's life of heaven.

- Imagine the world-shaping impact of people who desire to abound in hope by the power of God and to flood earth with the presence of heaven.
- Imagine the freedom of being immersed in God's love, living from an overflow of daily experience of God's gracious presence in our lives and bringing to the world tangible expressions of God's delight in the world.
- Imagine the impact of a group of people who actually expect God to do miracles, who live and work in anticipation of the fact that God 'by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine' (Eph. 3:20).

- Imagine the impact of a group of people in whom the fire of the Spirit has awakened a passionate, prophetic challenge to the logic and the powers of our time.

Christian leadership requires a prophetic, moral vision of a new way of living that is learned by falling on our knees before Jesus Christ and the altar of God's glorious grace.

The Jesuit theologian Anthony de Mello provides a wonderful analogy: Imagine you are dragging a heavy boat through sand, a boat so heavy that 50 people could hardly pull it, struggling and heaving while waves bash at the boat's stern. Pause from reading for a moment and imagine this scene. Put yourself in it. What is this boat that you're trying to pull to shore? Who is pulling with you? How does the struggle feel? Now imagine the tide rising, gently lifting the boat to shore. When the tide comes in and lifts the boat, two little children can grab a rope and easily pull it in. 'That's what happens when God's grace floods our hearts. Everything becomes so easy.'¹

For something to be 'easy' doesn't mean there is no strain, struggle or hardship. Nor does following the movement of the tide mean we make no efforts on our own. Leadership is hard because life is hard. There is agony, despair and frustration. We are called at times to pull against the current, to be countercultural. However, in the midst of this is found a genuine ease that flows from

1. knowing we are not alone, not on our own;
2. knowing we are living according to the current of God's future-shaping purposes.

We don't pull on our own against the sands of our time and the threatening waves of opposition. Grace-shaped leadership is flooded by the love of God and allows God to lift our lives into the rhythm of God's ways.

World Vision rightly focuses on child and staff well-being: on education, health, security and experiencing community in the love of God

¹ Anthony de Mello, *Seek God Everywhere* (Bombay, Society of Jesus, 2010), 110.

and others. This isn't expressed simply in small, incremental changes or politically acceptable accommodations to the commonly acceptable way of doing things. It is rooted in a totally different way of life – rooted in the transforming power of God's love and utter confidence in God's will for all people to abound. 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 15:13). *Abound* means 'to overflow'. When we speak of well-being, we mean to be flooded with joy and peace in the Holy Spirit, to be filled with grace.

The Passion of Grace-Shaped Leaders

From ill-being to well-being

I'm an expert on ill-being. I've worshipped the idol of work – making my worth and my identity depend on the effectiveness of my service. Many suffer from this same disease. We are gripped by the world's needs and are drawn to World Vision because we are determined to see change in this world.

Sometimes we may become more focused on providing people in poverty with material resources and structural changes than on actually caring for the people we are trying to help – more focused on results than relationships.

Sometimes God is approached more as a source of guidance and strength for us to do our ministry – almost as if God were our servant – rather than our ministry being to enjoy and serve God.

Sometimes the sheer number of needs that surround us drives us to our own failure.

How can we take a day off when trafficked children, abused women, people caught in crossfire, and starving families never have a day off? How can we play while those we serve die preventable deaths? Doing so seems as absurd as picnicking in a slum or in a refugee camp. Probably like many of you, I can never feel comfortable at holiday resorts that are islands of wealth surrounded by a sea of extreme poverty.

And so we keep straining at the boat, desperately trying to recruit God and other people to help us pull it in.

Yet God invites us to a radically different way.

Humanitarian effectiveness desperately needs grace-shaped leaders who help others to participate in the tidal action of God's grace, lifting us together to the shore of God's kingdom.

How hard it is for us to be free from the idolatry of our own effort!

Usually it takes reaching the end of our strength, facing our incapacity to make our lives or the world right. Twice in my life I've been hospitalised with critical illness, and the doctors were uncertain if I'd survive. Needless to say, these were extraordinary 'opportunities' to reflect on my life, my lifestyle, my motivations and my destiny. If I had died, could I say that I had lived my life God's way? As a result of the second time in hospital, my family and I took time off to refocus our lives, soak in the wonders of God's grace, delight in family and friends, and be taught more about a lifestyle defined by relationships rather than tasks.

Greg Boyle comments that service is the hallway that leads to the ballroom of community and kinship with God and others.² Unfortunately, many of us spend all our lives in the hallway and never join the dance. We may preach and believe the gospel of salvation by grace through faith – but we live a very non-gospel justification by accomplishments and work.

There's no good news in that strenuous way of life. Unless we allow room for God's grace to shape our life and work, all our efforts

- at balancing work with the rest of our life
- at enabling children to experience life in all its fullness
- at modelling a way of life that leads to well-being

² Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 188.

- at leading an organisation to prophetically challenge prevailing patterns of our age and witness to the coming kingdom of God

will be only frustrating human attempts to pull boats up on the sand.

A typical approach to discussions of well-being focuses on what we must do or on what our organisation or our boss must do. Well-being certainly includes the disciplines of recreation, play, reading, rest and relationships, and the spiritual practices of prayer, fasting, solitude, worship and study that restore us and round out the work we do. These disciplines are essential. They are gifts from God for us to grow in grace. Nevertheless...

These gifts are good but not good enough. With disciplines alone – which are actually intended to ensure, but not to take the place of continual encounters with God’s grace – we risk merely patching surface damage to our lives rather than undergoing the deep healing of our time-torn and sin-ravaged lives. Stay at the surface and we will likely twist these gifts of rest and worship into forms of Christian work and measure our worth by how well we perform them.

For a moment, rather than exploring what we and others should do to contribute to well-being, I invite us to hear God’s invitation to shift our gaze off ourselves and onto God, focusing on Christ’s work of grace to lift us and shape us! To pursue well-being based on our own actions can lead to a dead end, or even to a ‘dead start’. ‘Ill-being’ requires a more radical approach.

The entry point to well-being is the doorway of death, a death that is already behind us.

‘You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world’ (Eph. 2:1–2). It is usual to feel and act as if dying is the worst thing that can happen to a human being. Our objections to death are rooted in some primal certainty that death is not what we were created for. But Jesus stated outright that death has no victory over us, that he conquered death and that his resurrection opened a path to new and eternal life for each of us. And so death is not

the final foe lurking around the corner. Indeed, we already have two ‘deaths’ behind us – making the physical death we each face more like passing into life that is ‘abundant’ and ‘abounding’. First, the Christian faith proclaims that we were dead in our sins. Second, we have been killed (crucified) with Christ (Gal. 2:19). With Paul, we can now say that to live is Christ and to die is gain – with no lessening of the value of our earthbound bodies and life in bringing us towards this great future and allowing us to participate in bringing God’s kingdom to all humankind.

But the good news doesn’t stop here. Well-being moves quickly from our deadness to God’s life. ‘But God,’ Paul continues, ‘who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together in Christ’ (Eph. 2:4–5). We are raised – brought to a life of well-being – with and in Christ. If we have already died and already risen, then we have nothing to fear, nothing to lose, nothing to defend, nothing to prove. We are alive in Christ, clothed with unconditional love, embraced, affirmed, welcomed – and destined for life eternal in God’s redeemed and renewed creation.

Such a person has nothing to fear. Have you ever met anyone like this? Years ago, when it was still illegal to become a Christian in Nepal, my wife, Kerry, and I met an illiterate housemaid in a remote hill station in Nepal who was arrested and beaten for the crime of responding to the gospel. Although she had never read the Bible or even heard a sermon, she had encountered the risen Lord, who showed her that he is the Light and Life of the world. ‘Go ahead and kill me,’ she said to the police. ‘I know where I’m going when I die. Do you?’ Her fearlessness gave her power, and the police eventually released her.

We are recipients of God’s extravagant love. Our lives overflow with the living water of God’s abundant mercy. God is ‘rich in mercy’ (Eph. 2:4). Grace first helps us realise that God is pleased with us. In Christ we hear God’s ‘Behold my beloved son [and daughter], with whom I am well pleased’ (Matt. 3:17). God looks at us with divine pleasure.

The first word of God to us in Christ is ‘I love you and am pleased with you’.

The second word of God to us is ‘Be quiet and listen’.

The third word of God to us is ‘I love you and am pleased with you’.³

And the fourth word of God is ‘Now go into the world and so live that others know my pleasure in them’.

All the forces of our nurture, and also of our adversary, conspire to make it hard for us to believe that disapproval isn’t God’s first word and avoidance of death our first goal.

*Grace-shaped leaders are filled with
God’s unconditional love and abundant life.*

Us. Together. By grace.

Ephesians 2 leads to the pivotal word ‘*together*’ (v. 5). We are not alone. We are not isolated individuals. Well-being is not found through a ‘me and Jesus’ kind of life but through an ‘us’ with Jesus, a ‘we’, together. We no longer think in terms of mine but rather ours. We no longer view life’s goal as personal happiness. We no longer take our own life’s problems, or the problems of the world, into our own stumbling hands, but rather we leave them in Christ’s pierced and resurrected ones. Our solution is no longer to keep straining on the rope by ourselves, pulling the boat of our lives and world to safety on the shore.

‘By grace you have been saved... [so that God] might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus’ (vv. 5, 7). We ‘have been saved’ – not ‘we might be, could be, and would be saved, if only we...’. Complete. Finished. The work to save the world was already completed by ‘the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ’. We are not ‘saviours’; Christ is the Saviour of the world.

³ Ibid. 24.

It isn't up to us to set limits or conditions, to decide who is acceptable and who is not. How can we approach others with any sense of judgement, arrogance, or superiority when we are all utterly dependent on God's grace? If we are alive, it is only through Christ.

This frees us to see others as Christ does. We see beyond others' self-doubts as well as their pride, past shame as well as posturing, past insecurity as well as arrogance. If we are in Christ, we look at all people with a lover's kind and patient eyes. Can you imagine how seeing that way would affect your life at work, with your family and friends, your children, and your community members?

We all know that few people are changed by criticism – so why do we so quickly become critics of others? We all know that few situations are transformed by complaints – so why are we so often negative? God's grace frees us to echo to others God's affirmation: 'Aren't they amazing! Look at how hard they are struggling to manage their burdens. Look at my beloved children.'

The tidal movement of God's gracious love isn't based on present performance or even future possibilities. It is based on our identity as creatures marked by the stamp of divine goodness. We have the joy of approaching all people as unique miracles of God's grace.

This frees us from taking ourselves very seriously. The fact that all this occurs by God's grace, not by our own doing, means we expose the foolishness of the myth of the 'self-made person', the person who does everything by his or her own power. *Everything* depends on grace. None of us have any control over where, when or to whom we were born. We have limited control over our appearance, genetic makeup and intelligence. However, all of us have the opportunity to accept ourselves as a canvas on which God paints a picture of the riches of God's grace and kindness.

We have nothing to lose and everything to gain. We have already died and risen in Christ.

- *We needn't take any problem as life-threatening* – we're already fully alive.

- *We needn't be intimidated by opposition* – it is ultimately defeated.
- *We needn't be controlled by fear* – he who is in us is greater than he who is in the world.
- *We needn't be limited by weakness* – we can do all things through Christ.
- *We needn't be divided by walls of class, culture, context* – all are reconciled in Christ.

Grace-shaped leaders see others and themselves as unique canvasses on which God paints the portrait of God's kindness.

Walking in good works

All this emphasis on grace and on God's pleasure in us doesn't mean that we have nothing to do, or that it doesn't matter if we do work of poor quality. Rather, God's grace makes our good work possible. Our works of creativity and kindness aren't done to earn God's favour but are done in response to the favour we have already received. 'We are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life' (Eph. 2:10). We are not called to use our own strength to do good works. In fact, we don't even create our own works. God has selected ways for each of us to express God's unique creativity through our gifts, personality and passions. These works are gifts we receive, just as much as the air we breathe and the grace lavished upon us in Christ. God works through us.

As we work, the Spirit of God gives us the clear sense that we are part of something much bigger, deeper, richer and stronger than our own efforts. Regardless of how challenging, terrifying and way beyond our own wisdom and abilities the tasks before us may be, we move with a certain kind of freedom, knowing we are walking in the way of God,

according to the will of God, moving by the power of God. The tide has come in. We gently pull on the rope.

I once admired a cabinet a friend had made. In response to my praise he said: 'Yes, you are right. It is beautiful.' At first I thought this sounded arrogant. I had expected him to point out something he didn't like about his work. But then I realised his reaction was truly humble. He recognised that God had given him his ability, and together they had produced something worth celebrating.

It is worth noting that the works God has prepared for us are indeed good. We have no reason to excuse work that is careless, selfish or poorly done. We are meant to accomplish significant works – often learning through our mistakes – works we can be pleased with or find peace in, and for which others can be grateful. The works God does with and through us are well done.

Some of the most delightful good works God has prepared for us take us to those who feel unlovable and unworthy. God's restless love lasts until all wounds are healed, all deformities are made beautiful, and all shame is turned to laughter. God's Spirit propels us into the world as expressions of God's tender mercies. These good works lead us to persist with people until, as Greg Boyle says, God takes people from 'the wreck of a lifetime of internalized shame' and heals them with God's generous grace.⁴

What would change if we lived in the realisation that God delights in us? We would breathe into the world that same delight. It is true that Christian life and leadership require endurance, perseverance and continual encouragement. Sometimes we look foolish. Usually we face some opposition and adversity. But we need not be miserable or broken. The Christian life means living as God created us to live. We are recipients of God's gracious love, and we do good works that are custom-designed by God for us.

⁴ Ibid. 44.

*Grace-shaped leaders help others walk
in God's custom-designed good work.*

Reflections on passionate leadership

- Do I serve from the overflow of God's love and grace in my life, or am I still trying to prove something about my own worth and value? Why? What would I like to change?
 - How do those I lead feel about themselves because of our work together? Drained? Encouraged? Supported? Used?
 - When do I (and the people I lead) go home from a day's work grateful for the day and feeling fulfilled? What made that possible?
 - Does all this talk about 'immeasurable riches, boundless, abundant kindness, and being intoxicated by love' seem a little unreal in the midst of the harsh realities of your work? Why or why not? What would need to change to make it more real?
 - How can I help those I lead walk more fruitfully in the good works for which they were created?
-

CHAPTER 2

The Vision of Grace-Shaped Leaders

Grace-shaped leaders guide people and organisations so that we abound together in the current of God's grace. Grace-shaped leaders help us walk together in the good works for which we are created, going together with some who continue to feel their own disgrace and watching the Spirit lift us up together in the powerful movement of God's love in Christ.

God's prophecies through Isaiah portray this with compelling forcefulness. Isaiah 40:1 begins with a call and command: 'Comfort, O comfort my people'. The call of a leader is to bring comfort to people – to help them find in God the strength to bear and ultimately to surmount suffering, obstacles and opposition. 'Comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid.' A voice cries out in the wilderness, and we hear the voice of John the Baptist, 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill brought low; the uneven ground shall become level... Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together' (vv. 3–8).

In the remainder of Isaiah 40, the prophet leads us through four movements in the current of God's grace.

1. Perspective

To lead in grace, we need to see clearly. ‘Get you up to a high mountain’ (v. 9). All leadership depends on vision. What we see depends on where we look. Ignatius of Loyola said, ‘Strive to keep before your eyes your one and only goal, that is the greater service and glory of God.’⁵

We are named ‘World Vision’. Our name means we are propelled by a vision for the world and especially for the world’s vulnerable children experiencing fullness of life. For this to be sustainable we need to see God! If we look only at the world, we will be overwhelmed by its needs and our inadequacies. To be World Vision, we need to see with God’s vision. To see with God’s vision, we need to see with God’s eyes. To see with God’s eyes, we need to be persons in Christ. God’s vision propels us into the world with the twin prayers of (1) *solidarity* with God’s broken heart (‘Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God’⁶), and (2) *submission* to God’s coming kingdom. ‘Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matt. 6:10). The recognition that God’s heart breaks over human suffering is a stunning beginning, but it is only the doorway. The ballroom to which we are invited is the joyous celebration of earth being flooded with heaven.

Solidarity with God’s heart and submission to God’s kingdom are not merely matters of private, personal, subjective opinions and beliefs. They are not merely options among many possible humanitarian motives. We live in submission to the God of sovereign love. Whether this is acknowledged or accepted by others, we believe that it is true. Leading others into God’s abounding grace requires prophetic vision. We need to get up and see over the mountains of problems and limitations, opposition and obstacles, and others’ expectations and requirements – to see the level ground, the smooth highway on which God wants to lead people so that we all abound in the joy of God’s kingdom.

To live in the rhythm of God’s resurrecting, powerful love may put us out of step with the world. The Spirit sets our hearts to beat in rhythm with God’s heart, but this may be viewed by others as an

5 *Monumenta Ignatiana: Epistolae et Instructiones*, 12 v. (Madrid, 1903–1911) 1:720.

6 Written by World Vision founder Bob Pierce on the flyleaf of his Bible in 1950 upon viewing the devastation of the Korean War.

irregular, out-of-time heartbeat. That is actually good; we know that the rhythm of the world is not leading to the world's flourishing. The world needs a new way, a different rhythm, a new way of walking. If World Vision brings to the world only slight improvement in the world's ways of working, then it brings help but maybe no real hope. We risk bringing more of earth and little of heaven. 'Strive first for the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well' (Matt. 6:33).

Our vision is for God's kingdom to fill the earth and for our lives and our world to be transformed by God's sovereign love and clothed with God's gracious goodness. When we look at the world with God's eyes of grace, we recognise that God's purpose is not only to forgive us, or simply to make our sin-stained lives more manageable, but to make us and our communities completely better – the end result of the process we usually refer to as 'transformation'. Our work in the world isn't simply to establish systems of disaster mitigation and suffering remediation. It is to see the whole world clothed in the goodness of God's love. Julian of Norwich, the thirteenth-century English anchoress, was shown that the gift of grace is to discover that we are enclosed in the goodness of God.⁷

Grace-shaped leaders look with the eyes of Christ and see all of life clothed in God's goodness.

2. Proclamation

If we have been given vision from the mountain, then we are compelled to proclaim what we have seen. 'Lift up your voice with strength... herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say..., "Here is your God!"' (Isa. 40:9). We proclaim boldly what we have seen and heard without restraint. Most people who have actually experienced such a powerful vision can't help themselves from proclaiming what they have seen, even at great risk. God's passion can't be adjusted to whatever is acceptable to

⁷ See, for example, *Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love, in The Complete Julian of Norwich* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009), 83.

the varied powers of this world. But wait, some might say, ‘That could get us killed.’ Our response is ‘Yes, and where is death listed as the ultimate foe?’ Is that really the worst that could happen to us? Of course, we must be wise, compassionate and appropriate in all we do and say. There is no spiritual virtue in well-intentioned stupidity, rudeness or insensitivity, or in selfishly placing others at risk.

But if World Vision is faithful to its commitment to live as a partnership of Christians following Jesus, bearing witness to God’s kingdom and to the goodness of Christ, then we live with the bold affirmation of Christ and Christ’s way as the truth of God for all people. We should be neither awkward nor aggressive about this – whether with leaders of other faiths, or amongst halls of power at the United Nations, the World Economic Forum or the international aid agencies of governments. Rather, in our lives, deeds and words we simply bring good news to share about the heartbeat of God’s love.

All we have to proclaim are good tidings. Even when we challenge prophetically the unjust customs and cultural practices or give individual staff members critical performance reviews – we are pointing to what is right and good. People should have no need to fear. ‘The Lord GOD comes with might’ (Isa. 40:10), and that might is God’s unstoppable love.

We do not merely proclaim, ‘We are here to help,’ but rather, ‘God is here with might.’ How does this God exercise that might? God will feed people like a shepherd, gather the lambs together, and gently lead pregnant sheep (v. 11). God exercises might in sovereign gentleness. That is the kind of God the world can trust and follow.

Because God’s might is expressed in gentle tenderness, it is easy to affirm that Jesus is the narrow gate, for ‘our choice is not to focus on the narrow, but to narrow our focus.’⁸ Our emphasis is not on the narrowness of the way but on narrowing our focus to Jesus. The gate is not about difficult restrictions but a special way in. And even more importantly,

8 Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 31.

the point of the gate isn't the gate but what is on the other side. Jesus is the entry point into the tender, boundless love of God. There is nothing confining, restrictive or small about knowing we are beloved sons and daughters of God. The love of God's heart is immeasurably greater than our tiny imaginations can envision.

This requires learning to listen to the right voice. Physically, I have learned through years of sleepwalking to recognise the gentle voice of my wife over the noise of my dreams. Spiritually, I have come to learn this through years of listening each morning for God's voice through scripture. Recognising the right voice comes through familiarity, through daily practice. But knowing who is speaking is only part of the journey. Trusting what is said comes next, and then obeying. Learning to trust that the voice we hear is good and that we will receive the strength to obey is the journey of grace.

This requires not listening to the voices of naysayers. 'Gloomspak', the language of hopelessness, is quickly becoming the international tongue. Hopelessness destroys life more than the most invasive cancer. Hopeless people feel trapped – surrounded by problems, obstacles and injustices they cannot overcome. Some see violence as the only way to break out of their prison – whether violence against oneself through self-destructive addictions or even suicide, or violence against others through pornography, many sorts of abuse, theft, destruction, or even armed force. Hopeless people feel insignificant, as though their lives matter to no one. As a result, desperate measures seem totally legitimate.

Concern about ever-escalating social unrest and chaos has become many people's prediction for the world's future.⁹ While I write this, the 'Arab Spring of 2011' is bursting forth, overthrowing longstanding regimes in the human passion for freedom. Hanging over these changes is uncertainty over what vision can be achieved beyond mere rejection of past dictators. Will freedom from one form of tyranny lead to oppression by another? As Walter Brueggemann says, 'The dominant values of our culture, as they are embodied in economics [and] military policy...are values of hopelessness.'¹⁰ Our world is dying for genuine, realistic hope.

9 Robert Kaplan, 'The Coming Anarchy', *Atlantic Monthly* (February 1994).

10 Walter Brueggemann, *Hope within History* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1987), 7.

Even more tragic is the sad fact that Christians can be leading singers in the choirs of the naysayers. So-called Christian media is laden with those speaking of our present darkness, airwaves burdened with Christians' gossiping about the gathering evil conspiracy. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann proclaims: 'The Christian faith is losing its mobilizing power in history. Many abandon Christianity because they can find in it no power of the future.'¹¹

Discerning the goodness and presence of God First of all, discernment is not our efforts to determine God's will, but rather our recognition of God's sovereign, gracious presence. For 90 per cent of all situations, God's will is already crystal clear. The major conflicts in our world today aren't over ethics (what is good) but over identity, resources and power (how to protect and increase our goods). Most people in the world, regardless of faith, know the right things to do, but we don't choose to access the God-given capacity to do right in ways that surmount fears and build bridges rather than walls. Most know we are to love our neighbours and to walk the dangerous Jericho road to show kindness to those in need, even enemies. We need the willingness and capacity to do this. We do not need moral education alone; we need moral vision and power that moves us into moral engagement.

Grace-shaped leaders seek for the Spirit to build into every relationship and situation encounters with the gentle might of God.

3. Perspective

Isaiah returns us again to perspective. For the next dozen verses Isaiah 40 warns against losing sight of the size of God. He warns us not to shrink God down to our size (vv. 12–24). We are surrounded by temptations to settle for a small god, one as weak and unimportant as we are. Shrinking God to become the hero defending our own privileges and the on-demand servant of our selfish fears leads to the collapse of moral imagination and the death of courageous leadership.

11 Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, English trans. Douglas Meeks (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 133.

We can't accommodate God to our small size. In multiple ways Isaiah reminds us that we are dealing with the creator of the heavens and earth. Reducing the size of God smells of idolatry.

- No one directs God or tells God what to do.
- The nations that make such trouble in our world – whether threatening states or failing ones, super powers or powers seeking to become 'super' – are all bits of dust on the scales and merely empty wind (v. 15).
- We dare not try to fashion God after our image, making little idols who will do what we want them to do, whom we can control (vv. 18–20).
- Isaiah proclaims that even human rulers are nothing. Their legacy is only stubble (v. 23).

*Grace-shaped leaders proclaim to the world
the largeness of God
and are not intimidated by any human authority
or demonic power.*

4. Presence and power

Finally, Isaiah reminds us again not to be tempted to think God is not interested or not involved, or without the power to engage with our lives and woes.

God is not distant or uninvolved. Many Christians live as if they were deists or even atheists – we work as if everything depends on us, and we pray simply to get God to give us some guidance and resources. We go to church or devotions and then get back to work, trying to drag that boat up to the beach by ourselves. Isaiah reminds us that God is attentive to every need and every happening of history (vv. 25–27). Isaiah concludes this section with the often-quoted verse 31: 'But those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like

eagles.’ Don’t miss out on God’s power. There is no need to stumble and fall, collapsing on the sand in utter weariness (vv. 28–30). God will help anyone who asks to rise higher than the mountains, as high as the eagle.

God’s sovereign grace means we can live with real and enduring hope. We do not give up, no matter how difficult the obstacle. No brokenness, hurt or injustice is beyond repair. No sin or suffering is unredeemable. Our role as leaders is to clear away obstacles for those we lead so that they can fulfil their responsibilities as freely and fruitfully as possible.

Those who are poor genuinely need – but do not need only – percentage increases in their nutrition, income and education. They do not need only charity. They need justice, and God’s justice above all. Those who are wealthy need – but do not need only – percentage increases in the amount of their charitable giving. Even amongst those who give generously, there may still be a need to experience freedom in Christ to deliver us from fear and self-protection. Those who trust the most, hope the most. Those who hope most, give the most. *We all* need the kingdom of God; we all need to be delivered from the powers, wounds and possessions that ensnare us.

A grace-shaped organisation brings something new into the world. If we ride this current of God’s sovereign grace, then we refuse to be vestigial relics of a past era of charity and service. Rather, we are propelled into the world as heralds of God’s kingdom of gracious community and joyous kinship.

Grace-shaped leaders help to rewrite the playbook – the standards and rules of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) engaged in humanitarian relief, advocacy and development. We don’t merely serve according to standards of the ‘humanitarian industry’. We serve according to the qualities of God’s coming kingdom. We don’t seek mere disaster mitigation or development assistance – as good as these may be. We don’t mute our witness to God’s sovereign grace in Christ in order to make ourselves more acceptable or to avoid being offensive. Our privilege is to penetrate the harsh realities of world with the beautiful, healing glory of God.

Maybe every World Vision Area Development Programme (ADP) office should have flowers planted out front. In God's kingdom it is not just the rich who can enjoy beauty. Grace-shaped leaders provide the world with embodied, lived vision of that coming kingdom.

There is no point being called World Vision unless we are enthralled with a divine vision. God works through us to bring down mountains and raise up valleys, building a smooth highway on which the nations will walk into the goodness of God. This is the organisation we have joined. This is the journey we are on. 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 15:13).

Grace-shaped leaders have no explanation for our life and work except the transforming power of God in Christ by the Spirit.

What sustains us in the midst of the overwhelming challenges and incessant needs World Vision faces? How do we explain to others who we are, why we serve, what our goals are, as well as the source of our strength, hope and courageous joy?

Reflections on visionary leadership

- If I look at the people I lead through the eyes of Christ, what do I see?
 - If the first task of leadership is to discern what God is doing in our situation and to what God is calling us – what would I say?
 - What does it mean for me to clear away obstacles so that those I lead can fulfil their responsibilities freely and fruitfully?
 - What are we doing as a team for which the only explanation is the power of God?
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The Creativity of Grace-Shaped Leaders

The need for creative leaders

The world needs bold leaders freed by God's radical love and empowered by the creativity of God's Spirit to dream dreams and see visions. We need leaders who will not give up on the long journey into the coming kingdom. We need well-equipped men and women who are flooded with confidence in the loving sovereignty of God.

The world has always been led by dreamers. Throughout history 'radicals' have been driven by two forces: dismay with the present and a vision of a better future. They have abandoned the values of their era's status quo because of a passionate belief that life could be better. The 'possible' appeared to them as such an improvement over the 'actual' that no amount of sacrifice, suffering or insecurity was too high a price to pay in its pursuit. Driven by a dream, people have been willing to topple governments, overthrow religious establishments, reform social institutions, explore new realms of science, journey to unknown lands, and pursue life-transforming technological innovations. The world will never be the same because of these dedicated dreamers.

The Christian life is gripped by a vision. With this vision comes the presence and power of God to flood us with hope so that we sing the songs and live the life of the future in the midst of the present. The hope-filled Christian refuses to be confined to the complex dilemmas of the present

or to seek escape from them. Rather, through the Spirit of God in the presence of Christ, Christian life is the in-breaking of the presence of the future. We can give eyewitness testimony to the dynamic realisation in the present of the quality of human character and relationships that can one day be the experience of all people through Christ in God's kingdom.

The Christian life, therefore, *must* express the reality of hope and discern the empty lies of despair. The future has invaded the present. The capacity of Christians to live with joyous hope while being fully engaged in the harsh realities of our world is one of the most compelling signs of God's kingdom.

Receiving the capacity to dream dreams and see visions

Peter's sermon to the crowds in Acts 2 at Pentecost describes the power of vision in God's purposes. He quotes from the prophet Joel, who proclaims Israel's messianic hope: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy' (Acts 2:17–18).

God pours out the Spirit on people, not merely for gratifying spiritual experiences, not merely for tongues of fire, not merely for miracles – but for creativity and vision. One mark of the presence of the Spirit of God in the people of God is the capacity to dream dreams, to see visions, and to live with creativity. The same Creator Spirit by whom all of life was called into existence is now at work within God's people – manifesting the same extravagant creativity as in the beginning.

Henri Nouwen speaks of this in the context of his near encounter with death: 'Until now, I have been thinking and speaking from time into eternity, from the passing reality toward a lasting reality, from the experience of human love to the love of God. But after having touched "the other side," it seems that a new witness is called for: a witness that speaks back into the world of ambiguities from the place of unconditional love.'¹²

¹² Henri Nouwen, *Beyond the Mirror* (New York: Crossroads Press, 2001), 52.

*Grace-shaped leaders lead from the future
into the present.*

The crux of creativity

Our world is languishing because of lack of creativity. So much of life seems old and stale, run down and in the process of decay. Debates often focus on how to make the best of a bad situation with the limited resources we have at hand. Lack of creative alternatives is the biggest barrier to hope. Visions of new possibilities are fleeting, and resources for more effective responses seem to be scarce and decreasing.

At an international symposium of psychologists on creativity and its cultivation, Carl Rogers proclaimed that one of most desperate needs in society today is ‘for the creative behaviour of creative individuals...The great shadow which hangs over us all necessitates creative responses.’¹³ Stanley Hauerwas comments that both people in pain and our world in trauma desperately need to be shown that ‘God, not nations, rules the world and that the boundaries of God’s kingdom transcend those of Caesar.’¹⁴ Every life-giving creative act points to the will and way of God and witnesses to the coming of God’s kingdom.

The people of God are entrusted with all the resources needed for the world to flourish. Yet leadership feels as though we are constantly making tough choices about the allocation of insufficient resources. Lack of these resources is precisely what is killing or threatening to kill us. How is this related to abundance and to flourishing?

Into this void God sends his people, filled with the same Spirit that made the world in the first place. ‘I will send the Spirit, who will lead you into all truth, and through whom you will do even greater works than I have done’ (see John 14:12; 16:13). Greater works than the Creator! Scandalous! It sounds almost blasphemous – yet such is the promise of the One in, through and for whom all things are created.

13 Carl Rogers, ‘Toward a Theory of Creativity’, in *Creativity and Its Cultivation*, ed. Harold Anderson (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 69–70.

14 Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 48.

God's Spirit works mightily within us to release and express the life-giving, creative presence of God in the midst of the death-wielding, destructive oppression of our fallen world. Theologian and musician Jeremy Begbie describes this by saying that the 'Spirit enables and propels the dynamic process of creativity in humankind. The act of creating something, the cultural act, can therefore be spoken of as a "spiritual act"...Human creativity is supremely about sharing through the Spirit in the creative purpose of the Father as he draws all things to himself through his Son.'¹⁵

This is not merely about renewing the original creation but about the birth of God's new creation. It is the foretaste of a future that will bring forth more than was possible in the old creation. Moltmann says, 'The hope of faith must become a source of creative and inventive imagination in the service of love.'¹⁶

This is fine in theory, but what about our endless struggle with insufficient resources? Is it possible to lead without engaging in constantly choosing which things will be done and which will not? The first answer needs to be no; we will always have to determine priorities and make choices. There are always more needs and demands for our time and money than we have capacity and resources. Leadership always involves deciding to whom and to what to say no, and not just always wanting to say yes. But the gospel doesn't stop with this sad news of insufficiency.

Creativity isn't determined or limited by our abilities and resources. Our creative capacity does not flow from our areas of evident strength and giftedness but from the life of Christ in us, the creator of all life, who made everything out of nothing, and who therefore is not handicapped by our weaknesses and limitations.

God works through us, making good works, but our work depends on using the resources God has created. We don't create out of nothing. All our acts of creativity are participating in God's great creation and new creation. Therefore, it is not accurate for us to speak of being co-creators. The presence of Christ with us through the indwelling Creator Spirit frees

15 Jeremy Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 5, 179.

16 Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, 112.

us to be the centre of creativity for the world. Rather than being a stronghold of commitment to security and the status quo, the people of God are creatively on the move, confident that behind every problem there are solutions, in the midst of every difficulty there are abundant possibilities.

*Grace-shaped leaders are driven
by a creative hope.*

Prerequisites for creative leadership

The conference of psychologists mentioned earlier identified in the 1950s several prerequisites for creativity that have always been affirmed in the gospel and that are still urgently needed today.

1. Unconditional worth

Only with a secure vision of the certainty of our future and confidence in our unconditional acceptance by God can we live in passionate engagement with the painful realities of the present. Carl Rogers found that recognising that one's worth is not controlled by the evaluations of others, or even by one's performance, is an indispensable prerequisite for creativity. He refers to this as the condition of 'psychological safety', acceptance of an individual as a person of unconditional worth.¹⁷ As Christians, our lives are marked by the 'safety' of God's grace, knowing that we are accepted and of worth because of God's life on our behalf in Jesus Christ.

2. Personal integration

This is the result of what psychologist Abraham Maslow describes as the 'inner war within each person...To the extent that creativeness is constructive, synthesizing, unifying, and integrative, to that extent does it depend in part on the inner integration of the person.'¹⁸

¹⁷ Rogers, 'Toward a Theory of Creativity', 76–78.

¹⁸ Abraham Maslow, 'Creativity in Self-Actualizing People', in Anderson, *Creativity and Its Cultivation*, 88.

He stresses that all discussion of creativity must begin with the personality of the creative person rather than with the person's achievements. He refers to essential 'characterological qualities' of creative people – such as boldness, courage, freedom, spontaneity, integration and self-acceptance.¹⁹ As Christians, we recognise these qualities as the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. The Spirit frees us to know that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

3. Curiosity

Creativity assumes curiosity and the ability to enter into life with all its complexity. One must hunger and thirst to know more. Erich Fromm wrote, 'The capacity to be puzzled is indeed the premise of all creation.'²⁰ A lack of openness to the future and to change – in other words, a lack of faith and hope – may nurture desperation but does not feed creativity. Fromm asserts that creativity requires 'willingness to be born every day... To be creative means to consider the whole process of life as a process of birth, and not to take any stage of life as a final stage. Most people die before they are fully born. Creativeness means to be born before one dies.'²¹ As Christians, we are always puzzled, always curious, for we eagerly await the redemption of God's creation.

4. Freedom to fail

To be creative means we are willing to go where others do not go, to be regarded as foolish if need be, and even to make mistakes.²² When we live from one centre, Jesus Christ, before only one audience, God the Father, and know that God is for us, delighting in us, then we are freed from fear of failure. The grace of God empowers us to face life boldly, with no fear of loss, for in Christ we have already both lost everything (having been crucified with Christ) and gained everything (being made inheritors of God's kingdom).

19 Ibid. 93.

20 Erich Fromm, 'The Creative Attitude', in Anderson, *Creativity and Its Cultivation*, 48.

21 Ibid. 53.

22 Rogers, 'Toward a Theory of Creativity', 77–79. Rogers notes that he has discovered in his studies that defensiveness is the great adversary to creativity.

Therefore, change and conflict hold no terror. Fromm believes the life of creativity requires courage and faith. ‘Without courage and faith, creativity is impossible, and hence the understanding and cultivation of courage and faith are indispensable conditions for the development of the creative attitude.’²³ Here, more clearly than anywhere else, we find a psychologist describing the gift of the gospel. Where else can we find forgiveness that gives us the freedom to fail? What does this mean for our organisations and our leadership? How do we give others the courage to pursue their curiosity about better ways of working and living along with the freedom to fail in the attempt?

These four qualities (sense of worth, inner peace and integrity, curiosity, and freedom to fail) create a powerful bridge between Christians and all people, regardless of multi-religious contexts. These qualities aren’t the sole ‘possession’ of Christians, and they are desired by everyone. They are expressions of how God created all people to live. Therefore, we can affirm and praise these qualities in all people in which they are found.

Grace-shaped leaders affirm others’ worth, encourage self-acceptance, nurture curiosity, and permit failure.

Providing the world with solutions

Because these qualities are abundantly poured out in the gospel, they should be abundantly evident in the lives and deeds of God’s people. When others are searching for a solution to a complex political, social, economic or medical problem, the people of God should be first in line to offer hope and potential solutions. People of God provide ‘a creative contradiction to this dying world’,²⁴ living in joyous rebellion against all that keeps us from becoming what God intends us to be.

In a world hesitant to suggest that anyone’s life is ‘wrong’, we have the opportunity to demonstrate by the quality of our community in Christ and creativity in the Spirit what is right and life-giving and healing, and

23 Fromm, ‘The Creative Attitude’, 54.

24 Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, 119.

we invite others to share in this ‘right-making’ life of God. To people who perceive themselves to be trapped by their own or others’ actions, we do not stand by in silence. Instead, we have the privilege of exercising every means God gives to set people free from all that dehumanises, defiles, or threatens to destroy their humanity.

A few years ago our daughter had a serious car accident, from which she miraculously escaped without physical harm. After an early morning jog on a beautiful, sunny, cold winter morning, she was returning home in the car when she skidded on a patch of ice. A careful driver, she did everything she should have done, but the car slid onto loose gravel at the edge of the road, flipped, and rolled down a ravine. Its rolling was stopped abruptly by two trees.

A woman jogging past saw the accident, ran to the car, reassured our daughter, who was pinned beneath the overturned car, that she would call for help. Then she said, ‘Can I say a quick prayer with you?’ Calmed by her prayer, our daughter waited only a few minutes before 14 rescue workers arrived in two fire trucks, two ambulances and two police cars. This team laboured diligently for more than an hour to cut our daughter free from the car. One man’s only job was to hold her neck in case it was broken and to calm her while the others cut away at the car.

Some people merely stand on the side, watching a crisis, and shouting out advice. TV news, the Internet and social media commentators contribute to this response. ‘You really shouldn’t do that. It’s not wise to slip on the ice. Cars aren’t designed to roll down ravines. You should be more careful.’

Christians might be tempted to add: ‘But be assured, God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. Your life is more than flesh and bone. Soon you will stand before God in heaven. Are you ready?’

Some take action to protect others. They lobby to post danger signs. ‘Warning: dangerous curve. Beware of ice.’ Others try to protect others by putting down salt or sand on the road. ‘Let’s melt this ice as quickly as possible.’

Meanwhile, all around us are people who are trapped in dangerous circumstances. The jogger who prayed with my daughter told my wife later that as she saw the car flip and roll, she was flooded with an overwhelming sense that the woman in that car was her sister.

When we see the visible or hidden distress of people around us

- Do we recognise them as our brothers and sisters, call for help, and seek to reassure them of God's love and presence?
- Do we respond with the creativity, compassion, competency and commitment of a team of rescue workers, doing all we can to get people out of the situations that entrap them so they can freely live the life God intended for them?
- Do we try to remove the causes of their distress, speaking out for changes that promote well-being?

That stretch of road now has both warning signs and a barricade to help prevent other cars from sliding into that ravine.

Grace-shaped leaders intentionally walk the dangerous road to Jericho, eagerly aiding both strangers and enemies in distress, and working to make the route a safer journey to the celebration of God's kingdom.

Our world is filled with people who feel trapped. One day they will be set free. Like the Samaritan on the road to Jericho, we have the privilege of being one another's compassionate neighbours. God's Spirit gives us vision, courage and creativity to respond with the resources of God to help them flourish. We have nothing to lose.

We don't have to drag the boat of the world's needs by ourselves. The tide of grace has risen. The adventure is just beginning.

Reflections on creative leadership

- How do I describe the vision that motivates me as a leader?
 - How do I deal with the constant struggle with insufficient resources: time, money, trained and experienced staff?
 - Which qualities for creative leadership are most evident in my life and leadership? In which qualities do I most desire to grow?
 - What is the Jericho road on which we are walking as a team? How are we providing solutions to make life better for others?
 - For what do I desire prayer in my own leadership?
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About the Author

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