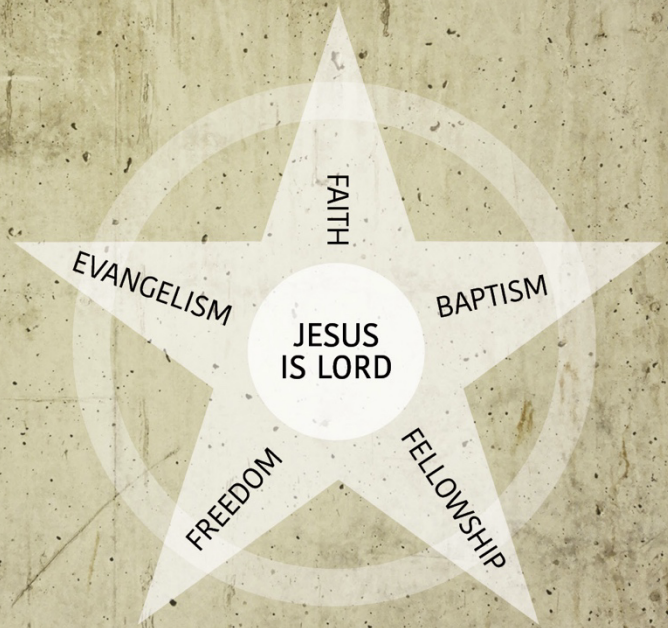


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Holding the Ring: Discernment and Leadership¹

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I don't think it is controversial to suggest that good discernment requires good leadership. You find a little in the literature on leaderless groups – but not very much. You find some more in the popular leadership literature on the idea of revolving leadership, as leadership is exercised by different people in a group depending on context and task. Some write more positively; others more critically, preferring to stress the few established leaders.² Good discernment requires good leadership – that would be agreed – but where does the work of the few and the contribution of the many fit in?

If, in particular, we are talking about discernment in a Baptist context, how might we offer a theological account of leadership that underpins a practice of good discernment? I would like to frame an answer by drawing on two theological ideas – one Baptist and intentionally shaped by Baptist ecclesiology; the other offering broader theological perspectives. For me, an early experience of Baptists doing theology well was at the Baptist Assembly held in London in 1997. Brian Haymes, then Principal of Bristol Baptist College, introduced a new report published by Council the year before, on *Transforming Superintendency*.³ I forget much of the detail, but what I do remember was Brian's insistence that if we are going to think theologically about practice then we need to begin with God. Unusually, I suspect, for Baptist Union reports, the document begins with an exposition of a

¹ This was an address first given at *Theology Live* January 2024 and repeats and develops material first published as 'Holding the Ring: The Marginal Leadership of All' in *Attending to the Margins: Essays in Honour of Stephen Finamore* edited by Helen Paynter and Peter Hatton (Oxford: Centre for Baptist Studies, 2022). I am grateful for the original publishers making this available.

² For example, Eddie Gibbs, *Leadership Next* (Leicester: IVP, 2005), p. 96 offers a positive view of rotating leadership; Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 86 offers a rejection of such an approach.

³ *Transforming Superintendency: the report of the General Superintendency Review Group presented to the Baptist Union of Great Britain Council November 1996* (Didcot: Baptist Union, 1996).

particular understanding of God as Trinity. We may or may not agree with all the details of Haymes' theological account, but it is crucial that this is where he chose to start. So let me to begin with a particular theological account of God as Trinity.

David Cunningham offers what is to me a compelling vision of what he describes as 'polyphony', located firmly in a relational trinitarian theology. Cunningham argues that 'the claim that 'these three are one' – the title of the book – calls into question the common assumption that oneness and difference are mutually exclusive categories.⁴ As part of this Cunningham then explores the musical expression of polyphony – you can play several notes at the same time so that they enhance each other, or an orchestra will draw in different instruments in such a way that the inclusion of one does not mean the diminishing of another. 'Christianity proclaims a polyphonic understanding of God . . . Attention to any one of the Three does not imply a diminished role for the others; all three have their distinctive melodies and are all 'played' and 'heard' simultaneously without damage to God's unity.⁵ Such divine polyphony allows us to see the created world in a similar perspective, particularly so that theology can, and ought to, be conceived as a musical endeavour and as 'bearing "musical" character.⁶ Cunningham argues that 'theology has operated with false dichotomies in which it is assumed that increased attention to one element necessarily decreases the significance of the other.⁷ He proposes instead that we must ask whether things can be so seen that multiple sources can be heard contributing to the greater whole, without the individuals being side-lined. We should not assume that the addition or increase of one thing means a decrease in another. Cunningham is working from broader convictions about the way we should best express the trinitarian nature of God that strongly stress the relational nature of God as Trinity. In this respect his work chimes with that of people like Miroslav Volf and Paul Fiddes. Not all would agree with those theological convictions.⁸ But I don't think you need to

⁴ David Cunningham, *These Three are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 127.

⁵ Cunningham, *These Three are One*, 129.

⁶ Cunningham, *These Three are One*, 129.

⁷ Cunningham, *These Three are One*, 128.

⁸ For an introduction to this debate see Jason Sexton (ed.), *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2014).

agree with all that Cunningham argues about trinitarian theology to draw on his discussion on polyphony. Nor does Cunningham offer a simplistic and naïve account that somehow, we are imitating God. Rather, he finds a connection between God's life as polyphonic and various aspects of the created order. I want to suggest that one helpful way we can understand leadership, especially Christian leadership, is as polyphonic.

Alongside Cunningham's account of polyphony, I want to add a particular Baptist ecclesiological perspective drawn from Nigel Wright. Wright has long argued that Baptist ministry should be understood as 'inclusive representation', that while ministry is exercised by the whole church in which all participate, it is also exercised by some, set aside and ordained as ministers, in a particular and focused way. Such ministers represent the whole church in an inclusive way in which all are part of the ministry, rather than in an exclusive way.⁹ It is, of course, difficult to define what Baptists might deem to be normative in their theology, but it seems that if any view of ministry holds some kind of consensus, then it is Wright's language of inclusive representation. Paul Goodliff suggests that after the presumed consensus of the post war years there then developed a much greater diversity of views of ministry among Baptists, but in the twenty-first century 'a growing trend is to read ministry as inclusive representation and to do so with a sacramental form and theology.'¹⁰

There is a sense that Wright developed this language in an intentional irenic way, offering language that might bring these divergent Baptist approaches into some coalition. Many seem content with such a description, and those who would want to say more than this, perhaps advocating a more sacramental understanding of ministry want to say at least this.

Wright's understanding of ministry also seems to follow on from other ways that UK Baptists have sought to understand ministry. There is

⁹ Nigel Wright, 'Inclusive Representation: Towards a Doctrine of Christian Ministry', *Baptist Quarterly* 39.4 (October 2001): 159–74.

¹⁰ Paul Goodliff, *Ministry, Sacrament and Representation: Ministry and Ordination in Contemporary Baptist Theology and the Rise of Sacramentalism* (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2010.), 157.

the classic statement from the 1948 Baptist Union Council statement *The Baptist Doctrine of the Church* and echoed in the later report *Forms of Ministry Among Baptists*:

Ministry is exercised by the whole Church as the Body of Christ, which thus ‘preaches the Word, celebrates the sacraments, feeds the flock and ministers to the world’; but some individuals are called to spiritual leadership, exercising forms of ministry in a representative way on behalf of the whole.¹¹

I want to combine these two theological insights to offer an account of leadership more generally and then suggest how this might be significant for discernment more specifically. Any account of practice amongst our churches and the operant theology it contains will point to a significant variety of approaches in the exercise of leadership. There is clearly an account of leadership that stresses that discernment resides in those appointed as leaders, perhaps with a stress on their divine appointment. Leaders discern and decide and cast vision. Such a theology makes a very clear distinction between those who lead and those who follow. Such a view among Baptist writers is probably most clearly expressed by Brian Winslade, a Baptist minister from New Zealand who has also worked in Australia and USA. Winslade takes a very strong and explicit view of the senior pastor as leader, and resists the idea that leadership is exercised through the congregation. So Winslade contests that ‘a danger of overemphasis on the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers can be a subtle belief in the leadership of none or, worse still, the leadership of all. Congregational government does not imply congregational leadership.’¹² Winslade and others who write in a similar way from an American Baptist perspective have had some influence among British Baptists.

¹¹ *Forms of Ministry Among Baptists* (Didcot: Baptist Union, 1994), 17, quoting *The Baptist Doctrine of the Church*, *Baptist Union Documents 1948-77* edited by in Roger Hayden (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1980), 8.

¹² Brian Winslade, *A New Kind of Baptist Church: Reframing Congregational Government for the 21st Century* (Macquarrie Park, NSW: Morling, 2010), 4-5.

Simon Kelly,¹³ in contrast, offers an interesting commentary of the temptation in culture to mythologise the single leader. Kelly recounts both the story of Chesley Sullenberger III who famously landed a plane without engines in the Hudson River and a piece of research conducted afterwards into the way this story was recounted in the press. What was in fact a very complex set of processes that involved many different people, events, and conditions was simplified into the heroic act of one man, because the USA needed a hero. It suggests that Sullenberger was portrayed as the classic all American masculine hero, modest, impeccably smart, silver-grey hair with his humility adding further to his hero image. There is a similar tendency and danger in some of the more popular Christian literature to idolise the one gifted leader, with damaging consequences.

Then there is also an account of leadership which suggests that discernment does rest with the whole church but the leadership of that process resides clearly with the elected leaders. There is perhaps epitomised in what has become a reasonably commonplace statement that suggests Baptist believe in the ministry of all and the leadership of some. Paul Beasley-Murray thinks this had long been accepted by Baptists,¹⁴ but in reality, it is actually limited to a small number of authors from the end of the twentieth century onwards. The first time I am aware it is used is by Mike Nicholls in 1990 who simply suggests this is 'biblically right.'¹⁵ It is then used as the title of Beasley-Murray's contribution to a collection of essays on ordination in 1993,¹⁶ and the subheading in a chapter on 'Ministry and Members' in Nigel Wright's 2005 book *Free Church Free State*, although with some caveats,¹⁷ and repeated by Beasley-Murray in 2006¹⁸ and 2015.¹⁹

¹³ Simon Kelly, 'Leadership and Process' in *Leadership: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* edited by Brigid Carroll, Jackie Ford and Scott Taylor (London: Sage, 2015), esp., 180-83.

¹⁴ *Baptist Times*, 1 April 2011.

¹⁵ Mike Nicholls, 'Ministry: Mean What you Say', *Fraternal* 230 (1990): 13.

¹⁶ Paul Beasley-Murray (ed.), *Anyone for Ordination* (Tunbridge Wells: Marc, 1994), 157-74.

¹⁷ Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 160.

¹⁸ Paul Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers: the Baptist Way of Being the Church* (2nd Ed.; Didcot: Baptist Union, 2006), 114.

¹⁹ Paul Beasley-Murray, *Living Out the Call* (Self-published e-book in four volumes, 2015), 30-1.

There is a helpful intent here to resist any clerical paradigm. It is not just ministers who exercise ministry, but all are involved. But there is also here a desire to find language that separates out the role of the many to share in ministry and the role of the few to offer leadership. There seems to be a real irony here, though, in rejecting one form of dominance for another. The fundamental problem it seems to me is this desire to separate out roles – it seems too messy and complicated to say that all share in ministry and some share in ministry in particular ways; so, some authors have looked for a simpler and more binary approach.

In contrast, I want to propose a different approach to leadership – shaped by the two theological positions of polyphony and inclusive representation. I suggest we should best understand leadership as a relational practice in which the whole church share, within which some exercise leadership in particular ways. To pick up the language of the 1948 Baptist Union statement, the Church not only preaches the Word, celebrates the sacraments and feeds the flock, it also offers leadership. Or, following from Wrights' inclusive representation approach, I want to argue for the leadership of all and the leadership of some, which suggests that the leadership of all and the leadership of some is not a 'zero sum game', in which there is limited 'leadership' to be divided out. This is the significance and insight of a truly polyphonous approach. Too much of the literature seems to me to work on a binary and analytic approach: if I am a leader, you must be a follower; and if you are a leader, I must be a follower so can't be exercising leadership. A polyphonic approach suggests that leadership can be exercised by multiple people without what one offers being diminished. In the same way that the orchestra is not diminished by what each instrument brings, with different instruments at times taking a lead, so leadership in our churches is not diminished when it is offered by the many not just the few.

There has been in recent years a lament from some that in church life the gift most frequently downplayed, side-lined or avoided is the gift of leadership.²⁰ Am I being unkind when I notice that those who make

²⁰ See, for example, Martin Young, *Church Meetings* from Freshstreams, available at <https://freshstreams.net/wp-content/uploads/Church-Meeting-Martin-Young.pdf>; Andrew Rollinson (ed.), *Transforming Leadership: Essays Exploring Leadership in a Baptist*

such a claim tend to be those who think they have the gift of leadership! The lament, therefore, is a complex one which seems to express a frustration that some feel they have not been able to exercise *their* leadership gifts in the way *they* would like. Presumably because they think that the actions and decisions of others have not allowed them the space to lead. This seems to me to be the language of the zero-sum game – what you offer diminishes my contribution. I want to argue that we should see such a situation quite differently through the image of polyphony and ask how the leadership of all contributes to a greater whole. We value the gifts of leadership given to some who exercise these in a particular way, and we should expect those who are ministers to be actively engaged in the practice of leadership. But equally, we value the leadership of all, because the more who contribute to discernment the richer and deeper the polyphonus result.

Holding the Ring

One metaphor we might use to describe this kind of polyphonic inclusive leadership is that of ‘holding the ring’². It is a metaphor that emerged for me out of a conversation with a friend, and other former Principal at Bristol, Steve Finamore. To exercise leadership is to hold the ring. I want to suggest this means two things for how leadership is needed and is used in discernment.

First, writing at this point as a minister, I hold the ring for others, so that the leadership of all is exercised. Part of being set aside for ministry will involve the exercise of leadership, but I do this in a way that aims for all to be involved, this is inclusive representation. I have no interest in arguing that there should not be those elected to certain offices in the church or that we should avoid the issue of power. We must face up to the ways that power is always present, held and used. But I suggest that the ‘few’ will exercise their leadership in a way that holds the ring for others. This does not mean the minister being entirely neutral on everything as if they have nothing to contribute. This is not the image of polyphony. Nigel Wright argues strongly for

Context (Glasgow: Baptist Union of Scotland, undated), 6; an address by David Coffey quoted in Clive Burnard, *Transformational Servant Leadership as Exemplified in the Ministry of the Reverend Doctor David R. Coffey* (DMin Thesis University of Wales, 2014).

leaders to be proactive because, he writes, it is ‘not good enough for leaders passively to wait for others to take all the initiatives.’²¹ But I don't read anyone arguing for those appointed to offices in the church to be passive. The key question is whether the leadership that ‘leaders’ rightly exercise involves or precludes the whole church from sharing in leadership, whether leadership is restricted or polyphonous.

This will not be simply a managerial approach that prioritises efficiency, nor is it a retreat to democracy so that everyone simply has a voice. Instead, it pushes us to think more deeply about what is happening when the Church gathers. We should certainly see this as much more than decision-making, and it even takes us beyond the idea of discerning, a fuller and richer concept than decision making. There is a deeper sense that what we do in Church Meetings constructs who we are as a church.

Baptist church life prioritises relationships in the community as being of central importance, and these relationships have teleological significance. In other words, holding the ring for others is more than simply discerning answers to particular questions, it is also part of our whole discipleship in which the final goal is our growing into the stature of Christ. Holding the ring for others insists that our growth in discipleship is always part of what is happening including in any discernment or decision-making process. Relationships are not simply utilitarian – necessary for making decisions – but essential; when decisions about buildings and money and even mulled wine are long gone, what remains are relationships through which we find our identity in Christ and in which we grow into the full stature of Christ. This is what we are doing when we hold the ring. Leadership approaches shaped in some way by the ‘great man’ theory categorise some who will always be leaders and others who will always be followers, and thus have a tendency to infantilise others. To hold the ring is to encourage all to share in leadership, prioritise relationships, and take responsibility thus moving towards this teleological maturity. It is fascinating how a developing branch of the much broader category of leadership studies beyond the church has developed

²¹ Wright, *Free Church, Free State*, 160.

theories of 'relational' and 'co-constructed' leadership.²² This is part of what are often called contemporary, rather than classical, perspectives, part of an 'emerging' understanding of leadership in a 'post-heroic' approach. Instead of a focus on the particular traits or skills of individual leaders, 'leadership work is a social process of co-creation' and so 'rather than the person it is the practice that needs to be developed.'²³ Lucia Crevani, one of the writers in this field, asks: do individuals interact with a given situation and then leave that situation the same, having shaped the interactions, or is there any way in which the individuals are also shaped by the social engagement? She suggests the former imagines us growing through independence, the latter through inter-dependence.²⁴ Although written in a 'secular' work, to me this seems theologically right! Further we can offer an even richer account of such inter-dependence based on a teleological and eschatological account of relationships; holding the ring has significant theological depth.

Baptist church life also draws on a proper charismatic ecclesiology, based on texts like 1 Corinthians 12, which offers an account of the gifts given to all carefully positioned between Paul's subversion of the strong by the weak and his appeal to seek the greater gifts of love. The rhetorical function of these passages seems to be to undercut their desire for status as well as an encouragement to give particular space to those that might be thought as weaker.

Stuart and Sian Murray Williams are in effect arguing for such a charismatic ecclesiology in their book *Multi-Voiced Church*, when they talk about the 'expectation that the whole community is gifted, called, empowered and expected to be involved in all aspects of church life.'²⁵ Here is the space for the Spirit to be at work in the church. A charismatic ecclesiology includes within it gifts of leadership and those with such gifts will need to ensure they are enabling and empowering others. This is a rightly subversive leadership which holds the ring,

²² For introductions see A. L. Cunliffe and M. Eriksen, 'Relational Leadership', *Human Relations* 64:11 (2011), 1425-449; Lucia Crevani, 'Relational Leadership' in *Leadership: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* edited by Carroll, Ford and Taylor, 188-211.

²³ Crevani, 'Relational Leadership', 208.

²⁴ Crevani, 'Relational Leadership', 191.

²⁵ Stuart and Sian Murray Williams, *Multi-Voiced Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012), 6.

seeking to help ensure that the gifts of all are valued and developed, that those who might think they have little value and whose voices are marginal are heard clearly by all, and that those who might wish to shout loudest are restrained. But it is not entirely dependent on the leadership of a few or only begins with them — it begins with the work of God’s Spirit who gathers the church and gives gifts to all. This is a polyphonic approach based on inclusive representation. Paul Fiddes, expresses this well when he suggests there should be a creative tension between the way that ‘the few’ and ‘the many’ share in oversight or leadership, this being a particular work of God’s Spirit in the church,

which allows for spiritual oversight (*episkope*) both by the *whole* congregation gathered together in church meeting, and by the minister(s) called to lead the congregation. This oscillating movement between corporate and individual oversight is difficult to pin-down, and can lead to disasters when it begins to swing widely from one side to another, but is based in taking the rule of Christ seriously.²⁶

Such holding the ring is not always easy. At times this will mean being very firm and accepting conflict and ensuring that those with the very loud voices or the most knowledge, who are used to dominating, are not allowed to stifle the leadership of all, so that there is truly space for God to speak in unexpected ways. It will resist the temptation of a simple efficiency as if making decisions is really the most important thing. It will require courage, experience and a deep sensitivity to God. It is the exercise of slow wisdom, in such a way that this changes us.

If first, then, holding the ring is a more appropriate way for the exercise of ministry, in terms of the way that a minister relates to others, the few and the many, a second way we might run with the metaphor, concerns the nature of ministry itself as a distinct calling. I might perceive that my role as minister is to hold the ring for others, but still insist that I am the only one who can hold the ring! There is a significant theological discussion behind this around the necessity of ministry – in traditional terms whether ministers are part of the *esse* of

²⁶ Paul Fiddes, *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way* (Oxford: Whitley, 2000), 22.

the church (and so essential) or given for the *bene esse* of the church (important for the church's flourishing but not essential to its existence.²⁷ But I suspect that the issues here tend to be more driven by personality than theology.

Part of my own realisation is that I don't need to hold the ring so tightly as if somehow it is in my control and without me everything would fall apart. I don't let myself succumb to the fantasy that I am indispensable and without me everything would fall apart. Others will hold the ring too, in the same way that others will be involved in preaching, and leading worship and pastoral care. Others hold the ring too – I don't need to hold it tight – and this will also mean that others hold the ring for me to contribute too. One of the hymns I have gone back to again and again, expressing something of a vision of church I found deeply helpful and challenging, says:

Brother, sister let me serve you.
Let me be as Christ to you.
Pray that I might have the grace
To let you be my servant, too.

I will hold the Christ-light for you
In the night time of your fear.
I will hold my hand out to you;
Speak the peace you long to hear.²⁸

Not all will feel able and have the gifts and skills to hold the ring well so that the leadership of all can be exercised (not all will preach or play music), but I certainly shouldn't feel that it is only me who can do this and feel threatened when others step up. This is to resort again to the zero-sum game. Polyphonous inclusive leadership celebrates all that others have to bring, recognises my need for what others will bring to add to my contribution, on the basis that the result is richer and deeper and fuller.

²⁷ Baptists have normally insisted that ministry is for the *bene esse* of the church; Nigel Wright offers one of the strongest recent accounts, proposing that 'they are almost necessary but not quite absolutely'; see Wright, *Free Church Free State*, 173.

²⁸ © Richard Gillard, *Baptist Praise and Worship 473* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 336.

Am I being naïve and unrealistic? Can this work or do we simply end up with someone dominating in the end? The problem is, of course, our frailty and brokenness; the ways we find too much of our identity in our roles and the way that status feeds our insecurities. It won't be perfect, but it must be possible. I wonder playfully at times whether the eschatological future will be full of leaders and followers. Of course, God will be all in all, and we might say God will be the Leader, but surely when we are all fully grown into the stature of Christ among us there will be no leaders and followers, just a glorious polyphonic inclusiveness.

I began seeking to locate this in the doctrine of God and this is where I end too. Personally, I find not only Cunningham's account of polyphony inspiring, but his whole trinitarian approach compelling. I have been schooled by those who take a relational approach to God as Trinity, and I find this the most helpful theological account. For Cunningham of course there is the perfect polyphony with God, because here there is the most perfect relationships of self-giving. Our calling, though, is not somehow to imitate God in ways that are impossible, but as Paul Fiddes argues to participate in these rhythms of grace so that our lives and our leadership are shaped by our sharing in God's life.²⁹ I suggest that there is real hope and possibility because polyphonic inclusive leadership is possible not because of my ability but ultimately because of the work of the Spirit and God's grace.

Notes on Contributor

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²⁹ This is the whole theme of Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: DLT, 2000).

