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Reflection: [Christian Leadership](#)



‘The end’

L. Gregory Jones explores the way Christianity changes the nature of leadership.

by [L. Gregory Jones](#)

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“What is Christian about Christian leadership?”

The colleague who posed the question has spent his career considering how to best prepare future business leaders. He is a senior leader at an organization that has become the world’s top provider of custom executive education. He was curious -- and perhaps suspicious -- about whether leaders of Christian institutions are any different than those leading for-profit institutions.

For good reason. Too often, we Christians, troubled by the malaise that afflicts many of our congregations and institutions, have turned uncritically to secular business and leadership literature desperately searching for quick fixes and one-size-fits-all techniques. As a result, we have found ourselves swirling in intra-Christian polemics: some leaders loudly commending the latest books on effective leadership, with others equally loudly claiming that Christians are called to be faithful and prophetic rather than selling out to popular notions of success.

The polemics are tearing us apart rather than building up the Body. Adopting an either-or position will not equip our institutions to act as incubators of transformative leadership and cultivators of thriving communities. My colleague’s question is the one we need to answer: Is there something distinctively Christian about Christian leadership?

Yes: The end.

The end? I don’t want you to stop reading -- this isn’t the conclusion of my reflection. Rather, it is the end -- the goal, the purpose, the *telos* -- that shapes Christian leadership and makes it most distinctively Christian. Our end is to cultivate thriving communities that bear witness to the

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inbreaking reign of God that Jesus announces and embodies in all that we do and are. This should shape the way we think about our lives, our institutions and the way we lead our institutions.

In one sense, it is so obvious that it scarcely needs mentioning. The answer brings to mind the old story of a pastor inquiring during a children's sermon, "What is brown, has a bushy tail and gathers acorns every fall?" The kids are silent for a few moments, then one child responds, "I'm sure the right answer is Jesus, but it sounds like a squirrel to me."

Of course the right answer to the question, "What's Christian about Christian leadership?" is Jesus. Centering our lives in Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, enables us to locate our institutions and our leadership in this comprehensive story of God.

For a long time I took for granted the "why" questions about purpose: Why do Christian institutions exist, or need to exist? My wake-up call occurred a few years ago in a conversation with a group of other seminary leaders. I asked what I thought were basic questions I anticipated some "less enlightened" donors or judicatory leaders might ask of us: Why are seminaries necessary? Or even important? After a long, awkward silence, one person said, "We exist to reduce the number of fundamentalists in the culture."

I gulped. It was a bad diagnosis of our culture, I thought. But even worse, we cannot advance the church's mission in the world by identifying our purpose by what we are not. As a group, we could name our activities. But we could not tell our own story of shaping communities of faithful (if flawed) discipleship, nor could we claim the church's rightful and historical role as the leaders of innovation in education, health care and social service.

By now most Christian leaders have learned from secular business literature to "take the long view," whether in strategic planning or by following Jim Collins's advice in "Good to Great" for Level 5 leaders.

But we Christians are called to develop an even longer view, a view that must incorporate the best thinking in business, psychology, history and other fields but situate it in our story as followers of Christ. The end in Christian perspective is not simply the termination of things, but rather the fulfillment of all for which we have hoped, yearned, prayed, worked. The end is what orients our thinking about how we can honor the past as we search for the most faithful and imaginative way forward: to be a people who bear witness to the Holy Spirit who, by conforming us to Christ, is "making all things new." The end helps us discern and clarify what needs to be preserved and what needs to be jettisoned for us to be faithful. The end enables us to be a people of traditioned innovation -- envisioning the future by honoring the church's past -- rather than merely ceaseless change.

Claiming the end as the heart of our story is critical for Christian institutions and Christian leadership. For it returns us to basic questions all organizations, for-profit or otherwise, must ask. Why must we exist? What do we do that no one else can do as well? What would be lost if we disappeared?

In a time of economic tumult and unceasing reports on the decline of the mainline, we are prone to constrain our perspective by focusing on short-term questions of survival. And, in one sense, that is understandable. But it is especially in times of tumult that we most need to return to our fundamental commitments and focus on the end. After all, it might give us a new beginning.