

Are these images culturally bound?

As we explore these images with groups of leaders, there is a frequent discussion around the influence culture has on the way we understand the meaning of the images. As the group grapples with applying the images to their own contexts, the question is often asked: "Isn't this image just a product of certain cultural ways of viewing leadership?"

The root of the question usually lies in the dissonance people sense in trying to imagine behaving like one of the images in their own cultural context. Since those who are often seen as successful leaders in our own environments don't seem to behave like the images, we wonder if maybe the picture of leadership is just something that works in a culture different to our own. It is understandable to be concerned that the interpretation of the images could be cultural norms imported from some other context.

A clue that helps me negotiate these thoughts comes from the instruction Jesus gives his disciples in Matthew 25. They are jostling for recognition and position in the coming kingdom. Jesus makes it clear that the norms of society where leaders look for power and position are contrary to the way things are in God's kingdom. This discourse is one of the most striking counter-cultural statements about leadership in the Bible. While most Christians are now comfortable that the concepts of leader and servant can be melded together into one concept, at the time of Jesus' teaching the contrast between powerful leaders and disenfranchised slaves must have been mutually exclusive. His statement must have been striking that those who are great in the kingdom will be those who have the attitudes and actions of servants.

If we dig just a little below the surface of leadership in most current cultural constructs, the very human desire for leaders to be treated with deference, respect, and privilege is as evident now as in the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. Leading with a genuine servant identity is as countercultural today as back then - in all our diverse cultures.

The kernel of the meaning of the shepherd image is the nurture and development of those being led, and not the benefit of the leader. Again, our leadership norms thinly disguise a determined goal-orientation (where followers are means to achieve the goal) as shepherd leadership.

From whichever culture we examine the scriptures, our desire is to accurately understand what God has intended to convey to us. The human authors of the Bible each wrote out of a cultural context that is centuries removed from all the contexts of our day. We all contextualize the message to understand it in our own frame of reference, and we all are subject to the possibility of either correctly grasping, or completely misunderstanding, the meaning. As we examine these metaphors that communicate God's desires for leaders, we each do so from our cultural framework. Our task then is to interpret the instruction inherent in the images so that we faithfully apply them in ways that are accurate to what God has revealed to us, and understandable in our own culture.

How does a loving shepherd leader behave in my context? What does it look like in my country to act as a humble servant? What does a faithful steward do in the place I live? How can I live out the reality that God has gifted people around me in ways that he has not gifted me, and yet has entrusted us to lead his kingdom on earth?

The most common of the images to be challenged is the image of shared leadership in the body of Christ. There can be a quick assumption that it is merely a product of the low power distance cultures of the world. Those who come from places where hierarchy is esteemed can sometimes feel that and positive patterns of society are being undermined by teaching that leadership is shared. Can it be true that shared leadership is only right on one side of the power distance spectrum? Our task in being faithful to the full teaching of the Bible demands that we don't lightly arrive at conclusions that are palatable to our culture. Even in the parts of the world where hierarchy is not esteemed as much, it is quite common to see leaders share very little of their leadership; they just negotiate the flat structure with culturally adept practices that allow them to keep their autonomy.

Each of us must wrestle with how we can be true to the fact that God gifts us in limited ways to make us interdependent on each other, especially in our leadership roles. How does that then look in a hierarchical setting? How can a leader who is expected to present the position of extreme authority faithfully serve, not as the head (usurping the divine head), but as a loving, humble and faithful leader who allows all to exercise their gift and role in the body of Christ? That question will need to be answered by those inside the context, and not by those from other contexts.

As we figure that out, we are not at liberty to disregard the Biblical teachings by using cultural pretexts, but we do have the freedom and the responsibility to apply them well.