

THE SOUL OF THE LEADER

The Purpose of Transformation

*What kind of person must a leader become for
their leadership to become a blessing to
others?*

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A Foundational Essay
www.thesouloftheleader.com

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A Foundational Essay of The Soul of the Leader

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Foreword

This essay is written to be read slowly. It is closer to a meditation than a manual, and it will give most to a reader willing to live with its question before looking for its answers. Every serious leader eventually discovers that the deepest challenge is not deciding what to do next, but discerning what kind of person leadership is making them become. The pages that follow pursue a single question:

What kind of person must a leader become so that their leadership becomes a blessing to others, strengthens the moral inheritance of future generations, and ultimately glorifies God?

The Purpose of Transformation

Transformation has become so familiar in organisational life that it is almost taken for granted. What was once associated with exceptional periods of change has become the ordinary condition of leadership. Strategies are revised while they are still being implemented, and supply chains redesigned against one disruption are reconsidered as the next set of assumptions shifts. Organisations rarely move from one settled state to another; they adapt while the environment around them is itself changing, often before the consequences of the previous transformation have fully emerged.

There are good reasons for this. An organisation that cannot respond to reality will eventually lose its ability to serve. Needs evolve, established products age, new technologies open possibilities that older structures cannot easily absorb, and resources must be used more wisely and institutions prepared for conditions their founders could not have foreseen.

Transformation is often necessary.

Yet necessity does not provide purpose.

Change can become so continuous that it begins to justify itself. Organisations transform because markets are changing, then transform again because the first transformation has created new conditions requiring another response. Activity increases. Capabilities expand. Progress becomes easier to describe than its destination.

What is transformation for?

Transformation cannot answer that question by itself. It describes movement, but movement is not yet direction. Greater efficiency may release resources for valuable work, or make exploitation more effective. Technology may enlarge human capability while reducing the space in which human judgment is exercised. Organisational resilience may preserve something valuable, but resilience alone cannot tell us whether the organisation itself remains worthy of being preserved.

Every transformation therefore contains a judgment about the future.

Someone must interpret the present condition of the organisation and the world it operates in, treating some developments as temporary and others as fundamental, and a future that does not yet exist must be imagined clearly enough to shape decisions in the present.

A transformation programme may begin with the straightforward objective of reducing costs through automation. Eighteen months later, customer expectations have changed, the technology has advanced beyond its original assumptions and employees now spend most of their time dealing with the most complex and vulnerable cases. The original business case may still appear successful, yet the organisation is no longer answering quite the same question. The transformation has altered not only its operations, but the judgment required to lead it.

The future does not wait while programmes are implemented. The organisation is altered by its own transformation, as are the people leading it, and what appeared essential at the beginning can look very different two years on. Means begin to influence ends, and the process can reshape the very purpose that first justified it.

Governance can clarify authority. Data can reveal patterns. Programme management can coordinate decisions, dependencies and risk. None of these can finally determine what ought to be pursued, what should be preserved, what cost is acceptable or what kind of future deserves the organisation's growing capabilities. Those judgments belong to persons.

The visible transformation of an organisation rests upon an invisible process within those who lead it.

The visible dimension is the one everyone can see, in structures, systems, technologies and financial results. The invisible dimension is less obvious but ultimately more decisive. It concerns how leaders perceive reality before they act upon it, what they recognise as good, what they fear losing, what they are prepared to sacrifice and where they locate their deepest security. It includes judgment, courage, restraint, and the capacity to stay truthful when pressure makes a more convenient version of reality attractive. None of these qualities appears on a transformation dashboard.

The two dimensions develop together. Organisations transform people while people simultaneously give transformation its direction. Leaders shape the institutions entrusted to them, yet the work of leading reshapes the leaders themselves. Every important decision leaves something behind in the organisation, but it also leaves something behind in the person who made it.

It is therefore not enough to ask whether leaders are capable of directing change. We must also ask what directs the leaders.

No leader interprets reality from a neutral position. Every judgment rests upon some understanding of what is ultimately valuable, what a human being is and what an organisation exists to accomplish. That reference point may remain unnamed, but it is always present. It may be financial performance, institutional survival, reputation, power, or a particular understanding of human flourishing. Even appeals to reason or humanity depend upon prior assumptions about what reason is capable of knowing and what human life is ultimately for.

When those assumptions refer only to further human assumptions, transformation gradually becomes self-referential. The organisation moves toward a future imagined by people whose understanding of the good was itself inherited from other people and institutions that are also changing. Each movement draws its legitimacy from movements already under way, so that capability increases while clarity slowly diminishes.

This takes nothing from the importance of professional knowledge, experience or reason; responsible leadership cannot exist without them. It recognises only that none of them can supply its own final point of orientation. A leader may read the present with great sophistication, project futures with real precision, and still be unable to judge whether the future being pursued is genuinely good.

The question of transformation therefore reaches beyond methods, governance and leadership competence. It reaches the formation of perception itself. What enables a leader to recognise reality truthfully, to imagine the future responsibly, and to tell what is merely attractive from what is genuinely good? What orders the leader's loves and keeps

growing capability from becoming its own justification? To whom, or to what, is the leader finally connected?

One ancient tradition begins precisely here.

The Christian Scriptures do not dismiss organisational performance, resilience, productivity or professional excellence. On the contrary, they assume that these are genuine goods and that leaders have a responsibility to pursue them faithfully. Their claim is more fundamental. They argue that every one of these goods requires moral direction, that direction depends upon discernment, and that discernment itself depends upon the formation of the person who perceives reality.

This is why the question that opened these pages is at once profoundly personal and profoundly public:

What kind of person must a leader become so that their leadership becomes a blessing to others, strengthens the moral inheritance of future generations, and ultimately glorifies God?

The question begins with the person because institutions cannot sustain the realities they depend on unless those realities first live in people. Trust is practised before it becomes an expectation; justice is recognised in persons long before it is written into policy; and responsibility and respect for human dignity become the habits of organisations only because they were first carried by people.

These realities accumulate across generations, embedded in relationships, institutional memory, professional standards and cultural expectation, so that long after those who first embodied them have disappeared, others still benefit from an inheritance they did not create. This largely invisible inheritance may be called moral capital.

Financial, intellectual and institutional capital remain indispensable; they create value and enable organisations to flourish. Yet none of them stays trustworthy in isolation. Each depends on a deeper inheritance, formed through generations of lives that learned to practise trust, truthfulness, justice and faithful stewardship.

Every leader receives that inheritance and influences its future condition. It can be consumed for immediate advantage, preserved without being renewed, or strengthened through work that leaves the moral conditions of future flourishing richer than it found them.

The purpose of transformation reaches beyond adaptation. It must account for what an organisation becomes, what its work contributes, what kind of people it forms and what it leaves behind.

Paul's letter to the Romans enters this question at precisely this point. In the twelfth chapter, Paul turns from what God has done to the life that may now be lived in response. He speaks directly about transformation, yet he does not begin with capability, ambition or a programme of improved behaviour.

He begins with mercy.

Learning to See

The opening of this essay ended on an unexpected note. When Paul finally turns to transformation, he does not begin with effort, or discipline, or moral resolve; he begins with mercy. That can seem surprising only until we ask what mercy is for. Mercy is always an answer, and it cannot be received as grace rather than sentiment until the reality it answers has first been seen. If transformation begins with mercy, we have first to understand why mercy is needed at all, and so learning to see is not a preliminary exercise to be finished before the real work begins; it is already part of the work itself.

Most of us assume that seeing is a matter of having enough information: that if the data improve and the facts are faced honestly, better judgement will follow. Modern leadership education largely shares the assumption, and much of what it teaches is indispensable; organisations deserve to be led intelligently. Yet experience tells a more complicated story.

An executive team spends months designing a transformation programme. The diagnosis is accepted, the strategy approved, the investment secured, and the organisation begins to move. A year later much of it has been done: new structures, new reporting lines, new systems. And yet something essential remains untouched. The difficult conversations are still avoided, the same departments still guard their interests, and decisions are still delayed for reasons no one will say aloud. The visible transformation has advanced; the organisation beneath it has barely moved.

The strategy itself was rarely the deepest problem. What the programme had never reached was the place from which the organisation actually lived: the fears that decided which risks were allowed, the guarding of status, the unspoken arithmetic of whose career each decision served. Leadership assumes that organisations change through structures, incentives and programmes, and sometimes they do; more often the visible changes only expose an older, invisible reality that had been shaping the organisation all along.

The same holds for persons, because knowledge alone rarely changes anyone. A leader recognises that ambition has begun to crowd out stewardship and goes on building an identity from achievement; another grants, as a matter of intellect, that trust cannot be manufactured and keeps exercising authority through control; a board admits that fear has entered its culture and continues making the decisions that feed it. The information is all there, the reality has been named; the life is unchanged.

The distinction is older than leadership itself. Augustine saw that the deepest human difficulty lies not in ignorance but in love: we are always moving toward whatever we believe will finally give us life, security and worth, so that the real question is never whether we love but what we love most. He called it the *ordo amoris*, the order of loves. A rightly ordered life is not one from which desire has been emptied, but one in which each love has found its proper place under God. Disorder begins when good things become ultimate things.

None of this is reached by introspection alone. Our stated convictions tend to describe the person we hope we are; our lives reveal the person we are actually becoming. The order of our loves is written into ordinary existence: in what the imagination returns to when it is off duty, in what we cannot bear to lose, in the conversation we keep postponing and the compromise we have learned to call prudence. A spouse often sees it before we do, and so does a trusted friend or an honest colleague, not because they hear what we believe but because they watch what our lives keep producing.

Organisations possess an order of loves as well. Every institution tells two stories: an official one, written in mission statements, annual reports and leadership speeches, and an operative one, written in everyday decisions, incentives, tolerated behaviour and the actual use of power. Like persons, they reveal what they most deeply love less by what they proclaim than by what they repeatedly do.

To see truthfully, then, requires more than observation; it requires the willingness to stand under the truth rather than above it. This is why self-examination has always mattered within the Christian tradition, not as endless introspection, and not as self-improvement dressed up as spirituality, but as the recovery of reality. When the Psalmist prays,

“Search me, O God, and know my heart,” the prayer already concedes that there are regions of the self that stay hidden until they are brought into God’s light. Dallas Willard observed, again and again, that God does not transform the person we imagine ourselves to be but the person we actually are. Formation therefore begins neither in technique nor in greater determination, but in reality.

The first work of formation is not improvement. It is recognition.

For a leader, this recognition reaches past private morality, because leadership itself has become one of the forces that formed them. How has authority shaped me? Which habits have grown so natural that I no longer notice them? Where has success become bound up with my sense of who I am? And what kind of organisation have my loves produced, the organisation that has, in turn, gone on shaping me? Questions like these expose something deeper than behaviour: they expose condition.

This is where Paul’s letter to the Romans becomes most searching. Long before he speaks of the renewal of the mind, he describes a disorder that runs beneath particular actions into the whole person: not the occasional wrong choice, but a fracture reaching mind, desire, will and body together, so that even the good, once recognised, cannot be reliably lived. Romans 7 gives language to an experience every thoughtful leader eventually finds in themselves: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.” What Paul names is not ignorance but division. Anyone who has tried to lead with integrity knows it from the inside. We see the conversation that should happen and postpone it; we hold that authority is stewardship and catch ourselves protecting a reputation; we mean to be generous and find ourselves attached to control. The contradiction is rarely dramatic; it is woven into ordinary leadership.

Seeing has happened. Transformation has not.

We discover, sometimes only after years of trying, that the person we most wanted to become cannot be brought forth by the self we have become. This is the point at which mercy stops being a comforting religious idea and becomes a necessity. Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned that grace turns cheap whenever it is offered without truth: grace that

costs nothing asks little, because it has never looked honestly at what it forgives. Costly grace moves the other way; it lets reality be seen first, and only then speaks forgiveness. Mercy, then, is God's answer not to our isolated failures but to a condition we cannot cure in ourselves. The deepest discovery of truthful seeing is not only that our loves have fallen out of order, but that we cannot set them right by our own strength. Only when that illusion of self-transformation has died does mercy become something more than consolation; it becomes the one beginning from which real transformation can proceed.

Learning to Surrender

Truthful seeing ends in an uncomfortable discovery. It is not only that our loves have fallen out of order, but that we cannot set them right by the strength that disordered them. The will that needs changing is the very thing we would use to change it.

And so the honest question is no longer whether we can see what we have become, but how anyone becomes different at all.

Paul answers with an instruction that sounds too modest for the weight it carries. “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Paul might have told them to transform themselves, or handed them a discipline to follow. Instead he asks for something that comes before any achievement: that they present themselves, and leave the transforming to God. Before a single word about renewed minds or discerned wills, what is asked of us is not that we accomplish something but that we offer ourselves.

That is a strange place for a leader to begin, because leaders are trained in the opposite motion. The making of a capable executive is a training in taking hold: to analyse, to decide, to own the result and carry the weight that others cannot. These are real competencies, and institutions depend on them. But beneath them they lay down a deeper habit, the assumption that a serious person keeps control, and that whatever finally matters rests on their own capacity to secure it. That habit can build an organisation. It cannot change the person who holds it, because it is the very thing most in need of changing.

This is the first thing Paul asks a leader to unlearn. A leader cannot produce transformation. A leader can only become available to it.

What Paul asks is surrender, and the word is almost always misheard. It does not mean resignation, and it is not a stepping back from responsibility. Those who present themselves to God go on thinking, deciding, working and leading, and nothing in Paul lifts a single duty from their hands. What is surrendered is not the responsibility but the

ownership. The weight that truly belongs to leadership, the care of people and resources and consequences, stays exactly where it was. The other weight, the one no role ever assigned, the need to be the final author of the outcome and the guarantor of a future that was never theirs to guarantee, is the one they are asked to lay down.

The difference is almost invisible from outside. Two leaders can hold the same office, run the same risks and reach the same decisions, and no one watching could tell them apart. Yet one carries the work as something entrusted and the other as something possessed, and in time that hidden difference becomes the only difference that matters. The first can act decisively and still sleep, because the result was never finally theirs to secure. The second cannot rest, because a self is riding on every outcome.

It is worth noticing how physical Paul's language is. He does not ask for our intentions, our convictions or our finest aspirations. He asks for our bodies, and the word is chosen with care. The body is where our loves have hardened into habits. It carries what years of repeated choice have written into us, so that long before we decide anything we have usually already reacted. And so the recognition of the previous chapter, indispensable as it is, can never be enough on its own. A leader can see their fear clearly in reflection, and feel it take their voice again the moment the room turns against them. The mind can renounce what the body still performs.

Dallas Willard spent much of his life insisting that formation is never done to the mind alone. A person is not a set of ideas but a whole life at once: thought and desire, habit and body, the relationships that hold us and the reactions we never chose. These cannot be renovated one at a time, like rooms in a house, because they are not separate rooms; they are one person. And it is the person, not the parts, that Paul asks us to present, the entire self as it actually is, placed into hands able to remake it.

So his next sentence follows without a pause. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." We present; we are transformed. The offering is ours to make and the renewal is God's to accomplish, and the distinction does not shrink our responsibility so much as tell the truth about it. We cannot manufacture

the change we most need. But we can stop pretending our lives are ours to perfect, and we can bring before God not the person we would like to be seen as, but the person actually living our days.

When that begins, transformation stops being the repair of isolated faults and becomes something slower and more complete. The mind that has started to see, the will learning to loosen its grip, the body being retrained, the relationships that no longer only echo the old self, are gathered, without our engineering it, around a new centre. The life does not grow busier or more disciplined. It grows less divided, because it is increasingly ordered around Christ rather than around the self that could never hold it together.

A leader who has come even a little way into this finds a freedom that has nothing to do with control. The future is no more predictable than before. Markets still move, crises still arrive, and plans laid with great care still fail. None of that alters. What alters is the ground they stand on to meet it. They no longer labour to prove they can secure a future that was never in their keeping; they work faithfully inside it and leave its outcome where it always lay. The responsibility is undiminished and the dread is loosened.

But an offering made once is not yet a life. The pressure that first exposed the divided self does not vanish because it has been named and surrendered. It returns, and the hand that had opened begins to close again, usually before the leader has noticed. Presentation begins the movement; it cannot sustain it. Which leaves the question the next chapter has to answer. Once a person has placed themselves into God's hands, what keeps them there, day after day, long after the first surrender is past?

Learning to Remain

Presentation begins the movement, but it cannot sustain it, and the reason is not weakness of will. A self that has once been surrendered does not stay surrendered by remembering that it was. The offering has to be made again, and again, or the old ownership grows back over it, usually before the leader notices the ground being lost. This is why the word Jesus uses is not begin. It is remain.

He does not ask the branch to start. He asks it to stay. "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit." The image is almost too plain to hold our attention, and that is its danger, because everything is in it. A branch has no life of its own. It cannot live on what it drew yesterday, and it cannot make tomorrow's fruit by trying harder today. All it will ever become depends on a life that does not begin in it, and its single task is to stay where that life is given.

That task is harder for a leader than for almost anyone, because the work itself pulls against it. A role expands until it fills whatever space is left to it. Calendars close over. Decisions multiply. Urgency takes charge of attention, and the communion that first drew a leader toward God is crowded out, not by any refusal but by demands that are each, on their own, entirely reasonable. Nothing dramatic marks the loss. The leader holds the same beliefs, still prays, though now prayer has become something fitted around leadership rather than the place from which leadership itself is lived. The season does not ease. They remain busy long after they have ceased remaining.

So remaining cannot be a feeling, and it is not a conviction kept somewhere in the mind. It is a way of living, the continual return of the whole person to Christ until the returning itself becomes the deepest pattern of the life.

There is a reason it cannot stay a matter of the mind alone. Every love a person carries eventually seeks a body, some settled shape in which to live. Fear does not remain an idea; it hardens into the habits of a guarded life, the reflex to control, the reluctance to trust, the small

daily defences that no longer have to be chosen. Trust works the same way, and so do hope and love. What begins as an inward disposition sinks, over time, into the way a person actually moves through a day, until it is less something they believe than something they have become. If this is how a life is formed, then remaining cannot hover above the ordinary as an intention. It too must find a body. The return to Christ has to become habit and rhythm, a shape worn into the week, or it will stay a feeling and fade, as feelings do.

The image Jesus chose already says this. A vine left to itself does not stop growing; it grows in every direction at once, over the wall and along the ground and into any opening it finds, and to an untrained eye the abundance can look like health. The grower knows otherwise. Light stops reaching the inner branches, air no longer moves among them, and each year the fruit comes smaller and weaker. The life of the vine has not failed. It has scattered.

A life under load scatters in the same way. The leader does not stop working; they lose the shape within which their deepest life could go on maturing. This is why the old writers spoke of a rule of life, though the phrase misleads us now. Its root is *regula*, the straight length of wood a gardener sets in the ground to hold a growing thing toward the light. It was never a list of duties. It was a trellis. And a trellis makes nothing grow. It gives what is already alive a form in which to mature, and holds it where the light can reach.

A rule of life does that, and nothing more. It produces no grace and manufactures no change. It builds into an ordinary week the conditions under which a surrendered person keeps returning to the one who alone gives life. The practices the tradition hands down are misread the moment they are taken for techniques of self-improvement, as though prayer were a tool, silence a way to rest, Scripture a store of information. Read like that, they become one more set of tasks laid on people already carrying too many, and before long they are set aside, which only confirms the suspicion that the inner life belongs to those with lighter loads. That was never their purpose. They exist to keep a person near a life that is already flowing, and for nothing else.

Taken together they are less a set of duties than an environment. A living thing is not formed by any single act but by the whole climate it

stands in, the soil beneath it and the light above and the reach of the weather, and a person is formed no differently. Grace is rarely seized in isolated moments by force of attention; it comes mediated, through an ordinary life arranged so that it stays open to what it cannot produce.

In practice this is unspectacular and specific. It is the leader who, on the one morning the calendar has not yet claimed, leaves the waiting messages unopened and keeps the hour for something slower, and finds that the day which follows runs differently. The tradition calls that stopping Sabbath, the refusal that interrupts the assumption that the world is held up by our not resting. There are others, older and stranger, the evening spent looking honestly back over the day, the fast that shows how much of one's peace was resting on comfort, the reading of Scripture slowly enough that it begins to read the reader. Each touches a different corner of a life, and not one of them changes anyone. Each only turns the attention back toward Christ before it can settle for good somewhere else.

As the branch stays, the change, when it comes, is too slow to see at the time, and the leader usually notices it only afterward. The centre of things shifts by degrees. A decision begins to arrive from communion rather than from calculation alone. A desire loosens its hold, not because it has been beaten down but because it is no longer being asked to secure an entire identity. A habit fixed for years gives way, not to one more effort but to another life grown stronger underneath it.

A leader does not wake one morning transformed. They wake, rather, having prayed through years of mornings, most of them unremarkable and some of them dry; having surrendered the same ownership more times than they can count, because it kept growing back; having continued listening when nothing seemed to be said, rested when rest felt like waste, and returned, after every drifting season, to the same place and the same Lord. For a long while it looks like nothing. The pattern repeats, and repeats, and seems to change little. Then one day, without a moment they could point to, they find they have become someone they were not, and that the becoming happened while they were not watching, in the slow accumulation of a thousand returns.

It shows first in ordinary moments. A conversation that would once have been avoided is simply had, and had honestly. A criticism that

would once have wounded becomes something to learn from. A decision that fear would once have driven is made, to the leader's own surprise, in peace. Authority begins to sit more lightly in the hand, and success loosens its claim on the sense of who they are. None of it announces itself, which is why the leader is so often the last to see it. Others see it first.

This is the part leaders find hardest, because it cannot be hurried. They have spent their lives producing outcomes through intelligence and effort, and here is the one thing effort cannot reach. A vine is not argued into fruit, and no friendship was ever deepened by being managed well. Living things keep a slower time than projects do, and they are harmed by every attempt to speed them. So a leader learns, slowly, another relation to time: success received rather than possessed, failure met as a place of dependence rather than a verdict, waiting no longer empty but another room in which Christ is at work. The future stays uncertain, and its uncertainty no longer has to be defeated before faithful action can begin.

It is worth remaining in that uncertainty a little longer, because everything in a leader wants to hurry past it. The branch does not know what the season will bring. It cannot see the fruit forming, cannot hasten it, cannot hold it safe against the weather. It is given only the present union with the vine, and the fruit, when it comes, will come in a time that is not its own to set. A leader formed this way learns to live there, in the not yet, without needing the whole of it resolved before the next faithful act. The uncertainty does not lift. What changes is that it is now inhabited in company rather than alone, and that the life on which everything depends is not itself in doubt, even on the days when the outcome is.

What stands at the end of this is not a more impressive leader, nor always a more successful one by the usual count. It is a different person, one who carries authority in a different way. The division the earlier chapters traced, the self pulled between what it saw and what it did, has begun to close. The person is becoming, by slow degrees, one, and what now holds them together is no longer a self that could never manage it, but Christ, who can.

This is the first fruit of remaining, and it is at once the smallest and the most important: not a stronger institution, but a person able to hold leadership without being devoured by it. Yet a vine is never grown for its own sake. Its fruit is always for another, for the table and the guest and the ones who never saw the root. And so a question forms of its own accord, the one this essay has been moving toward from the beginning without yet being able to answer. If the hidden work of remaining forms a different kind of leader, what becomes visible when such a leader turns back to the organisations entrusted to them, the people they serve, and the world they will one day leave behind?

Bearing Fruit

The question that closed the last chapter was really Christ's own, and he had already given the answer. What becomes visible is fruit. He never asks the branch to concern itself with fruit first; he asks it to remain, because fruit belongs to a life that is received before it is expressed and cannot be manufactured, only borne. The temptation of leadership is to reverse that order, becoming occupied with outcomes before attending to the life from which those outcomes must grow. Christ places the order beyond negotiation. Life comes before fruit, communion before influence, and what a leader finally gives to the world arises less from what they have accomplished than from what they have become.

To such a leader, the institution is no longer only a structure to be managed or a strategy to be executed. It becomes an entrusted place in which a life already formed begins to take visible expression. What a leader has become does not remain private for long. It reaches the meeting before it reaches the policy and shapes a conversation long before it shapes a strategy, settling into the ordinary habits by which an organisation learns what is rewarded and feared, what will be forgiven and what will not be tolerated. The deepest influence of leadership is seldom carried by the decisions that attract the most attention. It arises from the order of loves beneath them.

An institution therefore comes, over time, to bear the marks of those who have led it, though never perfectly and never entirely. The two stories the earlier chapters found in a person are told by an organisation as well: an official one, in its statements and reports, and an operative one, written in how trust is distributed, how disagreement is handled, how authority is used, and how people who can do nothing for a leader's career are treated. A chief executive who, deep into a long budget meeting, allows a point to go that could easily have been won and makes room for a less powerful colleague to be right has changed no policy and said nothing anyone is likely to quote. Yet everyone in the room has learned something about what is safe there, and the lesson may outlast the meeting. Choices of this kind acquire a strange

permanence. They become part of the institution's memory and continue teaching people what the place actually loves long after the original decision has been forgotten.

That memory is what each generation of leaders receives from the one before, whether or not they recognise it as an inheritance. Some enter institutions in which truth has long been honoured, where a promise generally means what it says, authority has learned its limits and people expect to be treated justly because the expectation has become ordinary. Others inherit organisations already shaped by suspicion, concealment or fear and discover that changing a structure is far easier than restoring trust. In either case something has been handed down, and the institution carries the accumulated consequences of countless acts of stewardship and neglect.

This inheritance is what the earlier chapters called moral capital. It is seldom built by a single decision and almost never destroyed by one. It accrues across years of unremarkable faithfulness, through promises kept when no one was watching, authority exercised without domination, a true word spoken where silence would have been safer and generosity offered without calculation. It can also be consumed so gradually that those living through the decline mistake an inheritance for permanence. A society does not necessarily lose its institutions first and its moral order afterwards. More often it loses the moral order by which those institutions held their meaning, and only later discovers that the structures themselves can no longer bear a weight they once carried without apparent effort.

A leader therefore inherits more than an organisation. They inherit unfinished work, practices they did not establish, assumptions they did not choose and responsibilities that began before their arrival. Their task is neither to preserve everything exactly as it was received nor to behave as though history began with them. Stewardship lives between those two illusions. It receives with gratitude, judges with honesty and hands forward what has become more faithful than it was found.

There is a moment in which this becomes clearer than any argument can make it. A leader who has carried an institution for many years eventually reaches the end of their part in it and gives it to someone else. If those years have done their proper work, the handing over may

be surprisingly undramatic. The departing leader does not arrange the succession merely to preserve a personal legacy, install someone who will keep their name alive or linger at the edge of decisions that are no longer theirs to make. They give the institution to a successor who will change it, and they do so without the grief of a person losing a possession because they have long since understood that it was never theirs. What they hand on is more than an office, a strategy and a set of accounts. It is a way of holding authority, a history of choices about truth and trust, and an inheritance the successor will partly receive without ever being told that it is being received. Then the former leader steps back into the ordinary anonymity of someone whose stewardship has ended and allows the work to continue without them.

None of this secures visible success. Institutions remain creaturely realities, formed by people whose loves, like the leader's own, continue tilting toward disorder. Every generation must therefore resist the same drift because every generation inherits fruit and deformation together. There are seasons when trust deepens and seasons when it thins, times when truth becomes easier to speak and times when fear again governs what may be said aloud. Faithful leadership does not abolish drift. It meets it repeatedly with a patience that expects no final victory within history, because stewardship belongs to every generation and is completed by none of them.

For the same reason, the transformed leader eventually relinquishes another illusion, perhaps the oldest and most flattering of all: that the future can be mastered. The essay began in uncertainty: no leader can see far enough ahead to control what is coming, and that has not changed. Markets turn without warning, technologies overrun the assumptions built upon them, political orders shift, and institutions that once appeared permanent flourish for a season and then disappear. Christian leadership offers no exemption from this. It offers another way of inhabiting it. The future does not have to be mastered before faithful action becomes possible, because it was never a possession in the first place. It has always belonged to God.

Responsibility, held like this, changes in character without losing any of its weight. The leader still plans with care and carries the cost of hard decisions, but no longer in order to secure an outcome on which their

identity depends. The burden shifts without being noticed: responsibility stays wholly intact while ownership falls away. What belongs to God alone is left in the hands of God.

There is a freedom here deeper than the modern imagination usually permits. Every institution, however worthy, is temporary. Companies, universities, charities, governments and churches all live within history and share its limits. They deserve labour, intelligence, sacrifice and love, but they cannot carry ultimate hope. To ask them to do so is to place upon them a weight that only the Kingdom of God can bear.

This does not diminish the work. It enlarges its meaning. What is done faithfully within a temporary institution participates in something that is not temporary. The Kingdom of God does not replace the ordinary work of history but gathers it into a larger purpose, so that truthfulness in a difficult meeting, justice in a decision affecting people with little power and patient competence in the stewardship of resources become more than isolated moral achievements. They bear witness, however partially, to another order already present within this one, a Kingdom that has entered history without yet reaching its fullness.

A leader will seldom see where that witness finally leads. One honest conversation may form a younger colleague whose influence eventually reaches far beyond anything visible on the day it occurred. A just decision may preserve trust that a later generation receives without knowing where it began. An act of reconciliation made patiently and at real cost may enter a story no annual report will ever record. Fruit always contains seed. It is carried beyond the branch that first bore it and often beyond the lifetime of the person through whom it appeared.

This is why Christian hope reaches further than legacy. Legacy still turns, however subtly, upon what survives of us. The Kingdom turns upon what survives of Christ's work long after we have disappeared from the story. Institutions will pass away, the leaders who guided them will be forgotten, and even the finest achievements of history belong to an age that will itself come to an end. Not everything done within history lasts. Nothing offered faithfully to Christ is wasted, because it has already been gathered into a life larger than history.

The opening asked what kind of person a leader must become so that their leadership becomes a blessing to others, strengthens the moral inheritance of future generations, and ultimately glorifies God. The answer has come more slowly than such questions usually allow. A leader becomes that person not by mastering the future or perfecting an institution or securing a name that lasts, but by learning to see truthfully, to surrender honestly, and to remain faithfully until the life of Christ bears fruit through them, in work that serves people they may never fully know and generations they will never see. The visible work was never separate from the invisible life; it was always its expression, carried outward into a world the leader was only ever passing through.

Leadership comes, in the end, to rest not in success but in worship. The leader offers back what was only ever lent: mind and body, work and institution, success and failure, the fruit they were permitted to see and the fruit they never will. Nothing is finally owned. Everything is received, held in trust for a time and returned with gratitude to the One from whom it came. The Kingdom was the source of the whole journey and, at its end, is revealed to have been its destination as well. Only there does leadership become what it was made to be: love made visible in service and returned, at last, in worship to God.

A Note on Sources

Scripture is quoted from the English Standard Version. The governing question of these pages is the author's own.

The essay leans throughout on a tradition it does not pause to footnote. Its account of the order of loves, the *ordo amoris*, and of the earthly city within which every institution stands, is Augustine's, in the *Confessions* and *The City of God*. Its understanding of formation as the remaking of the whole person rather than the mind alone follows Dallas Willard. Its warning that grace offered without truth becomes cheap is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's, in *The Cost of Discipleship*. And its closing conviction that no faithful work is finally wasted echoes N. T. Wright, in *Surprised by Hope*.

The scriptural spine is Paul's letter to the Romans, the divided self of chapter 7 (verse 19) and the appeal of chapter 12 (verses 1 and 2) to present the body as a living sacrifice and be transformed by the renewal of the mind, together with the vine of John 15 (verse 5), in which the branch bears fruit only as it remains. The prayer "Search me, O God, and know my heart" is from Psalm 139 (verse 23).

About

Frank Wendt writes and teaches on the formation of leaders. The Soul of the Leader is his framework for the interior life of leadership and its consequences for the institutions, markets, and societies that leadership shapes. This essay stands as the foundation of that larger work.

Further writing and resources are available at www.thesouloftheleader.com.