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Leadership as a Christian Practice

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Abstract

Leadership is by its very essence, directed towards the future. It may be understood as a process of influencing others to commit and dedicate themselves to future visions and goals (Yukl, 2010, p. 26; Kotter, 1996, p. 9). Since the 1980s there has been emerging interest in practices, emphasizing practices as socially situated acts with sets of shared values, and internal and external goods. This article discusses to which extent it may be meaningful to interpret leadership as a socially embedded practice with a particular future goal, shaped by shared values. Drawing on the Neo-Aristotelian appeal to virtue ethics, promoted by Alasdair MacIntyre and others, several theologians have argued for the rediscovery of what they call 'Christian practices.' The article evaluates leadership as a possible 'Christian' practice drawing on the distinction between first tablet Christian practices and second tablet Christian practices, emphasizing the *diaconal telos* of the latter category.

Keywords: Leadership, influence, Christian practices, Martin Luther, diaconal telos

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Introduction

What happens when someone leads, and others are being led? How should one understand the thing called 'leadership'? How one understands leadership as a phenomenon has changed over time, and current definitions of leadership tend to emphasize leadership as a potential in everyone, rather than something reserved for people with special character traits. Contemporary conceptions of leadership also stress the importance of vision and purpose over position and power. Similarly, the leader is pictured as the key player in a team, rather than a solo player (Kellerman, 2012).

The call for leadership may come in many shapes and fashions, but one thing is inevitable: A leader invites followers. A leader with no followers is not a leader. Leadership is therefore fundamentally a relational enterprise. But leadership cannot be confined to relational dynamics alone. The purpose of practicing leadership is not just to create something relational, but to achieve a future goal by the means of the relational enterprise of leading and influencing others (Yukl, 2010, p. 26; Kotter, 1996, p. 9; Northouse, 2022, p. 6-7; Grint, 2010, p. 85).

If leadership is about influence, the practice of leadership is not a neutral thing. How we evaluate the practice of leadership, depends on how we assess the aim and quality of the intended influence that the process of leadership is supposed to bring about. Is the purpose of influence to increase the loyalty of followers, expand project funds, or grow the capacity for sound, ethical judgment among followers?

Trying to define leadership as a phenomenon is a quite complex and ambiguous endeavour to take on, perhaps even a contested one. This article interprets leadership with the help of practice theory. More narrowly, the article investigates leadership as a possible 'Christian' practice. What does this imply? David I. Smith has investigated if there is anything particularly Christian about the process of teaching and asked if there "is such a thing as teaching Christianly," if there is a way that "faith forms" the practice of teaching and the whole concept of teaching (Smith, 2018). However, this article does not discuss the possibility of leading Christianly and how faith may form the process of leadership. Rather, it fixtures theologically informed practice theory as the hermeneutical prism from which to interpret leadership as a possible Christian practice. The terminology will be discussed in further detail in the following sections. In developing the terminology, Lutheran Christology and Ecclesiology will serve as a hermeneutical point of entry. The research question of this therefore article is as follows: *In which way may the practice of leadership be understood as a 'Christian' practice*?

What is Leadership?

In his seminal book *Leadership (1978)*, James MacGregor Burns argued that leadership is a process where leaders and followers assist each other in advancing to higher levels of morale and motivation. The main point for Burns is that true leaders persuade and inspire their followers to act in accordance with the shared values and motives of both leaders and followers. Being a leader is therefore an act of raising the consciousness of followers, engaging in a shared enterprise, shaped by common purposes and collective needs. It is here that Burns makes the fundamental distinction between what he labels 'transactional' and 'transforming' leadership. The first describes a relationship of trade and exchange of (external) values, whereas the latter describes a kind of leadership which holds a moral dimension, where leaders and followers together engage in a shared enterprise to increase the motivation and morality of both (Burns, 1978).

Later, Bernard M. Bass introduced the term 'transformational' leadership. Bass emphasized that assessing the extent to which a leader is transformational comes down to the leader`s influence on the followers. The point is that followers of a transformational leader tend to feel more trust, admiration, loyalty, and respect for the leader. Moreover, because of the qualities that the transformational leader displays the followers are willing to dedicate themselves to a higher degree and work harder than one would originally expect (Bass, 1985). Robert K. Greenleaf`s notion of 'servant leadership' makes a similar claim: By replacing an autocratic leadership with a more holistic and ethical approach to leadership, with leaders taking on the role of the servant, more effective leadership will emerge, enhancing the performance of both organizations and institutions (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 24).

The focus on transforming or transformational leadership has also sparked an interest in the ethos of the leader and personal qualities a leader should demonstrate and develop to influence followers in the best possible way. The ability to display personal humility mode of self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation has been emphasized as an important character trait to develop for a leader. The most successful leaders, it is argued, can combine personal humility with professional will. They are characterized not just by making tough decisions and communicating a compelling vision, but by humility (Collins, 2001; Frostenson, 2016; Sousa and Dierendonck, 2015, and Caldwell et al, 2017). Similarly, Daniel Goleman has emphasized the importance of the emotional dimension of leadership. He would even argue that the leader`s primary task is emotional, namely, to articulate a message that resonates well with the followers` emotional reality, to create a sense of purpose that could move people in the sought-for direction. For this, the leader needs both self-reflection, self-awareness, and social skills (Goleman et al, 2013).

All these leader-centric propositions aside, this article is not mainly interested in the leader as such. The purpose of the article is not to investigate the leader and the traits a leader should develop to make himself and his business successful. Then the research question should have been "is there such a thing as a Christian leader?" Let us therefore consider leadership from a less leader-centric perspective: What sort of phenomenon is the process of leadership? More precisely, what constitutes or characterizes the *practice* of leadership?

Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard are famous for distinguishing between leadership and management as fundamentally different operations or practices, highlighting that effective leadership is task relevant, situational, and comes down to adopting the most fitting leadership style in the given situation, based on the readiness level of followers/audiences (Blanchard and Hersey, 1996). Others would emphasize that the practice of leadership involves decision-making, and that leaders use stories to influence audiences and followers. Drawing on his research on intelligence and creativity, Howard Gardner and Emma Laskin argue that effective leaders both create new stories and use the power of already existing narrative frameworks to influence followers (Gardner and Laskin, 2011).

If leadership has to do with influence, it is also fundamentally tied to the question of authority and what constitutes and legitimizes authority in a particular situation. In *The End of Leadership* (2012), Barbara Kellerman discusses how different conceptualizations of leadership relate to authority. She first emphasizes, with Freud, that a sort of foundation for leadership is people`s basic need for authority. Drawing on Thomas Hobbes, she finds that what makes leadership attractive, particularly in times of insecurity, is how a leader – say a king – would grant protection and benefits to followers. Followers would even be able to grant absolute power to an absolute leader who would promise to secure something in return, namely protection. This was the introduction of the social contract (Kellerman, 2012, p. 6-7, 10). However, such an approach to authority may lead to another kind of leader-centrism, and leadership – based on voluntary subscription from followers – would become obsolete (Kellerman, 2012,

p. 200). Rather, Kellerman argues, leadership should be understood as an equilateral triangle, with three equal sides – the leader, the followers, and the context.

The relationship between leader and followers is key in almost any take on leadership, what is 'new' here is Kellerman`s emphasis on the context. For Kellerman, the 'context' refers to the culture and social environment and whatever else a leader and the followers must engage and interact with. The key for Kellerman is that the context changes continuously, and so must our concepts of leadership and followership change, as well. Similarly, twists and turns in technology and politics have the effect that our ideas of leadership develop continuously. Kellerman therefore argues that the leader/follower-dynamic which characterizes much of our contemporary thinking on leadership may at one point feel as outdated as the ruler/subject-duality that shaped the authoritarian notion of leadership up until the 20th century (Kellerman, 2012).

Kellerman`s claim forces us to reflect on how our concept of leadership may change in a late modern world characterized by expressive individualism. Leadership becomes a more ambivalent enterprise when it is confronted with the quest for authenticity (Taylor, 1991). When the leader appeals to feelings of followers, what in classical rhetorical theory is called *pathos*, the quest for authenticity makes this appeal more complicated and complex: The credibility of the leader is constantly at stake in a whole new way, as it is often very difficult to "distinguish self from role," (Heifetz, 1994, p. 264) and any claim for authority is challenged by the quest for authenticity. However, faced with great insecurity, leaders are challenged to perform *adaptive change*. With adaptive problems, setting your authority as a leader does not necessarily imply looking for authoritative solutions (Heifetz, 1997, p. 87). Nowadays leaders are often expected to develop a more informal authority, which derives its strength from its ability "to meet expectations that are often left implicit." (Heifetz, 1994, p. 101). Bottom line, studies in what makes leadership appear authentic in times of change highlight *consistency* in words, actions, and values. When leadership is performed in this manner, it may even increase the followers` trust, including even beliefs about the leader`s integrity and honesty (Yukl, 2010, p. 344-346).

A similar critique on contemporary takes on leadership is offered in the book *The New Psychology of Leadership* (2011), which critiques an old understanding of leadership, that tends to focus on extraordinary historic figures and their extraordinary achievements. Within such a paradigm, the leader was typically seen as a genius with a special *charisma*, an inner gift of some sort. The authors here refer to a dilemma in Max Weber`s notion of leadership: The leader with a special charisma is set apart from the rest of the community. However, Weber sometimes understands the charisma of the leader to be something which is attributed to the leader *by* the community and sometimes Weber asserts that is an attribute of the leader (Haslam et al, 2011, 2-5). The new key word in this alternative vision of leadership is 'identity management.' According to the authors, leaders should work as 'engineers of identity.' (Haslam et al, 2011, 192, 188).

The critical proposals we have examined so far do indeed expand and challenge historic and contemporary concepts of leadership, but the lasting importance of influence and followership for any definition of leadership is not really contested. Leadership may still be interpreted as a process of influencing others to commit and dedicate to future visions and goals, where influence remains an inevitable and determining ingredient in a leader-follower-relationship set in a particular context.

All in all, without further attention to practice theory and theological hermeneutics of Christ`s presence in the world, it is hard to interpret leadership as a potential Christian practice. There are too many grey areas to cover as we try to identify leadership as a practice. Fundamentally, leadership as a potential 'practice' or phenomenon resembles the virtue 'courage.' Much like courage is considered a 'grey' virtue, which can be used to service both good and

bad purposes (Miller, 2002, p. 8, and Pury, 2009), leadership is a 'grey' phenomenon. Apart from the purpose to influence and taking lead by attracting followership, leadership, as a practice, escapes being captured in a simple definition, with defined qualities and characteristics. Rather, leadership appears to be a rather grey or ambivalent practice in need of further inquiry. And one thing is particularly grey – or better undetermined – namely, the *purpose* of leadership. In other words, leadership as a practice may have the purpose – or *telos* – to influence followers to move in a particular direction towards a particular goal. However, that *telos* depends on the situation, the particular vision, and the legacy or values of the enterprise the leader is leading.

What is a Practice, and What Makes a Practice 'Christian'?

Over the last 50 years there has been emerging interest in practices, emphasizing that practices may be understood as socially situated acts with sets of shared values, and internal and external goods. One stream of the engagement in practices has emerged out of a critical and constructive reading of, among others, Alasdair Macintyre's appeal to Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics in *After Virtue*. MacIntyre defines a (social) practice as:

> Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriated to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 187).[1]

Leadership is for sure a "socially established cooperative human activity." One may even argue, with those focusing on leadership styles and the qualities of the leader and leader-follower relationship, that the practice holds "standards of excellence" which are "partially definitive" of that form of activity. One may certainly find that the practice of leadership work to "systematically" extend the "ends" and "goods" involved. However, what the "ends" and "goods" of leadership are, is a more open question – and reveals the 'grey' nature of leadership as a practice, which was pointed out above.

The scope of this article is to evaluate leadership as a potential 'Christian' practice. So, what is a Christian practice in the first place? Drawing on MacIntyre and others, several theologians have spoken of 'Christian practices,' or 'practices of faith.' The claim has been that practices such as prayer, hospitality, forgiveness, and caring for the sick and the poor are crucial to a Christian everyday life. Two of the leading figures within the conversation, Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra, define Christian practices in the following way: "By Christian practices we mean things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs in response to and in the light of God`s active presence for the life of the world." (Dykstra and Bass, 2002, p. 18).[2]

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[1] For a lengthier assessment of the engagement with practices in theological circles, cf Norheim, 2014, p. 7-10, 16-26.

[2] They see their work as drawing on the work of MacIntyre in particular, but also social scientists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau, and even the work of Charles Taylor and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

However, Croatian-American theologian Miroslav Volf has pointed out that too little attention has been given to some of the more crucial dogmatic questions involved, such as discussing what makes a practice Christian in the first place and distinguishing between sacraments and practices (Volf, 2002, p. 248-251). This deficit may perhaps be due to the tendency to look at practices (mainly) from the perspective of the economy of creation (Hütter, 2007, 297).[3] The problem is that the turn to practices, particularly as represented by Bass, Dykstra and others, does not offer clear criteria as to what makes practices 'Christian.' In other words, on what grounds may it be valid to claim that Christ may be present in a particular practice that is claimed to be 'Christian' in some way, and does that qualify for naming the practice 'Christian' (Norheim, 2014, 27-32)?

This theological challenge becomes evident, even as we here try to evaluate leadership as a possible 'Christian' practice. Is it possible to argue that leadership as a practice offers an encounter with the presence of Christ? In the following sections of the article, I will discuss whether the practice of leadership may be understood a as a potential 'Christian' practice, drawing on the theological engagement with Christian practices over the last decades. I will also develop a distinction between different clusters or groups of Christian practices. Rooted in an examination of a Lutheran Christology and Incarnation Theology, I will conclude by pointing at the possible *diaconal telos* of leadership as a practice.

It is important to notice, that the new paradigm of Christian practices has emerged out of an attempt to answer the question of how to construct the (Christian) self in an era of secularization. Before making use of theological engagement with practices, it is necessary to examine some of the theological shortcomings that the movement or paradigm suffer from.

First, the new practice-talk tends to work with a rather optimistic anthropology: Most of those who have been discussing Christian practices do not elaborate very extensively and directly on human beings` position before God (*coram Deo*), and how the matrix of sin and brokenness into which human life is intertwined should inform the engagement with practices and virtue ethics. Sin is often described as falling short of God`s invitation to a way of life. Although it is acknowledged that human beings have the capacity to sin, this does not shape the conversation on practices (Bass and Dykstra, 2002, p. 16, 24). Rather the focus is on human needs, and how Christian practices can fulfil such needs, and through that foster growth, typically described as 'human flourishing,' and offer a meaningful and "life-giving" way of life (Dykstra and Bass, 2002, 22).

Similarly, Bass and Dykstra emphasize that Christian practices respond to "fundamental needs and conditions that exist in every culture." (Bass, 2008, p. 31) Among those advocating Christian practices it is underlined that the practices of suffering love make Christ and Christ's fidelity *visible* (Dean, 2004, p. 91). There is also a tendency to contrast an optimistic view of the practicing Christian community with an equally pessimistic view of contemporary late modern culture. Another ambitious claim is also articulated, namely that Christian practices may transform communities, but as the distinction between practices on the economy of creation and on the economy of salvation is rather imprecise, the understanding of human and divine agency in Christian practices is jeopardized (Norheim, 2014, p. 49-53).

In an attempt to address some of these shortcomings, German-American theologian Reinhard Hütter has argued for a distinction between different clusters of practices. Hütter

[3] Hütter finds that theologians with a fundamentally non-sacramental Congregationalist ecclesiology "will tend to favor either practices of witness or natural, everyday practices, depending on whether they prioritize, along the Barthian lines, the economy of salvation with its proper and unique practices of witness, or along liberal Protestant lines, the economy of creation with those practices that sustain human flourishing," (Hütter, 2007, 298).

finds that the first cluster of (Christian) practices are practices, which he finds to be necessary and constitutive for the church. In the light of the *telos* of these practices, he labels them the church`s core practices (Hütter 2000, p. 37).

Reinhard Hütter here draws on Martin Luther`s grouping of different marks of the church in the treatise *On the Councils and the Church* from 1539. Reinhard Hütter reframes these marks as practices. To evaluate whether it is possible to understand leadership as a potential 'Christian' practice we will draw on this distinction between different clusters of practices. This implies that we first take a closer look at Luther`s theological arguments in setting up a list of seven marks that are constitutive for being church. The third part of Luther`s treatise starts with a question, which should resonate well with many contemporaries: 'Where can I find an authentic Christian community?[4] Luther responds by pointing at seven marks of an authentic Christian community. According to the Reformer, they are marks of the true church, because Christ in his Word has promised his presence to these marks – namely, the Word, baptism, the Lord`s Supper, The Office of the Keys (forgiveness), services and ordinances, worship – praise and prayer, and discipleship in suffering (Hütter, 2000, p. 129).

Reinhard Hütter has pointed out that Luther`s arguments here offer an important hermeneutical prism as we examine what makes a practice 'Christian.' The marks of the church, according to Hütter, should be interpreted as first tablet practices, as they relate to the first tablet of Moses: They restore the relationship between God and human beings, through the promise of the mercy of Christ, which they offer. Ultimately, it is the very same promise, which constitutes these practices as true marks of the church. However, Luther also claims that there are other marks of the church, or practices if you like. They, on the other hand, relate to the second tablet of Moses. This implies that these marks are not exclusively 'Christian,' but rather should be seen as deeds and practices that all persons of good will might do, such as honouring your parents, helping your neighbour in need, and refrain from stealing or committing adultery (LW 41:167). They are not by necessity 'Christian', nor are they constitutive to being church. Thirdly, you also find marks or practices, which are indifferent, but may be helpful, like the chiming of bells – the so-called *adiaphora.* It is worth noticing, however, that Luther also pointed at a fourth group of marks, or practices. These represent a negative definition of church: In other words, where the second tablet practices are not kept, or violated, there is *no* church. In other words, where there is stealing, adultery, lying, etc – there is no Christ, and therefore no church (LW 41:167ff).

Leadership as a Christian Practice?

So, to which of these four clusters of practices does the practice of leadership belong to? Is leadership a first tablet practice, a second tablet practice, an adiaphoron, or a negation of the second tablet practices? How we evaluate this question, comes down to how we interpret the presence of Christ in these clusters of practices. In the following section, I will therefore shortly draw on Martin Luther`s interpretation of the presence of Christ and utilize the distinctions developed by the reformer to develop a hermeneutical framework to assess leadership as a possible Christian practice: I will argue that a closer look at how Luther interprets the presence of Christ, particularly in the sacramental controversies with the left wing of the Reformation, offers an essential, interpretative lens here; a way to better understand the potential

[4] Or, in Luther`s own words: "How will or how can a poor confused person tell where such Christian holy people are to be found in the world?" (LW41:148).

presence of Christ in practices, and subsequently to better understand what may make leadership a 'Christian' practice.

First, let us start by noticing that Luther`s understanding of the presence of Christ in the context of his theology of the Incarnation and his theology of the sacraments. Luther rejected Zwingli`s assumption that the risen Christ is located only at the right hand of God, which is confined to one heavenly location. Rather, Luther argues that as the right hand of God is everywhere, Christ is everywhere (LW 37:47, 55, 207). The implication of this claim is wide-ranging, even as we discuss leadership as a possible Christian practice. Fundamentally, such an understanding of the presence of Christ celebrates both the universal presence of Christ in creation, but also the particular presence of Christ in the sacraments, or what Reinhard Hütter calls the church`s core practices. Therefore, Christ is found both in, with and under all human experience and at the same time Christ is present to human beings in a special way in the places to which he has promised his saving presence.

Before we determine in which way it may be possible to interpret leadership as a 'Christian' practice, we need to look in further detail at how Luther distinguishes between different *modes* of Christ`s presence. In *Confession Concerning Christ`s Supper* (1528) Luther argued that there are three modes known to us in which Christ is present. The first mode, or the *circumscriptive* mode, is the mode where Christ walks bodily on earth, occupying and yielding space according to his size. This is the mode ascribed to Christ from nativity until crucifixion. The second mode, or the *diffinitive*, uncircumscribed mode, is where Christ "occupies nor yields space, but passes through everything created as he wills." This is the spiritual mode attributed to Christ from resurrection until ascension. This is even the mode Luther applies to the presence of Christ in the Lord`s Supper. The third mode, or the *repletive* mode, is the divine or heavenly mode. This mode is assigned to the way the exalted Christ is seated to the right of the Father. In this mode, created things "cannot measure or circumscribe him but they are present to him so that he measures and circumscribes them" (LW 37:222-223).

If we combine the distinctions Luther here made with the categorization of the *notae ecclesiae* in *On the Councils and the Church*, the distinctions between the different clusters of practices become even easier to discern, theologically. The first cluster of practices are those practices, which are by necessity Christian. These are practices on the economy of salvation, which offer the salvific presence of Christ, or Christ according to his *diffinitive* presence, which may be labeled 'first tablet practices,' parallel to Reinhard Hütter`s term, 'the church's core practices.' In the next cluster, you find the 'second tablet practices.' These are practices on the economy of creation, through which Christ may be present according to his *repletive* presence, which is a sustaining presence. These practices are not by necessity Christian.

So, what may make leadership a possible 'Christian' practice? Following the theological line of argument above, it is difficult to argue that leadership is a first tablet practice which offers the salvific presence of Christ. One would have trouble asserting that the internal good of leadership as a practice (cf MacIntyre) is the diffinitive presence of Christ. One may perhaps argue that the practice of leading a person to Christ may be understood as a first tablet practice. However, that special practice of leadership is, interpreted within this hermeneutical framework of Christian practices, is better labelled as 'preaching the Word' (Luther`s first mark of the church) or 'discipleship in suffering' (Luther`s seventh mark of the church).

It is for sure possible to argue that leadership as a practice is a sort of third-cluster practice, an *adiaphoron*, maintaining that leadership as an ambivalent or 'grey' practice may be conducted in different ways, depending on what the situation calls for. Categorizing leadership in this way, would perhaps assure a more open-minded approach as one evaluates leadership as a practice, emphasizing that the practice of leadership always requires strict scrutiny: Leadership may both be heroic, tyrannic, dynamic, and static.

Perhaps it would even be possible to argue that some practices of leadership belong to the fourth cluster of practices, the malpractice of 'Christian' practice – e.g. breaking the rules set out on the second tablet of Moses. This sort of leadership, which involves lying, stealing, and even murder, would be rejected as poor, bad, or even evil leadership by most people, and would therefore not really be considered a social practice in MacIntyre`ian terms – with standards of excellence and internal goods.

Then we are left with a final question: On what grounds may it be possible to interpret leadership as a second tablet 'Christian' practice? To examine this question in further detail, let us first look at a sermon Luther gave in 1538 on Maundy Thursday on the foot-washing in John 13. In this sermon, Luther deemed it necessary to include 'love' as a fruit of faith created by word and sacrament (Lathrop and Wengert, 2004, p.83). Luther`s argument in the sermon finds a parallel in how Luther towards the very end of *Confession Concerning Christ`s Supper* used the term 'the common order of Christian love.' This 'common order of Christian love' is lived out within the daily calling of the Christian by serving every need person, offering the thirsty something to drink, forgiving enemies, and praying for all men on earth (LW 37:365).

The term 'the common order of Christian love' helps us determine what may make it possible to interpret leadership as a second tablet 'Christian' practice. Basically, it comes down to the purpose of leadership, the *telos* of leadership: If leadership as a practice is characterized by a *diaconal telos,* which implies love for the other, and the neighbour, it may be interpreted as a second tablet 'Christian' practice. Second tablet practices are namely 'Christian' insofar as the 'common order of Christian love' is practiced through them – for the benefit of the neighbour and all creation, as the *telos* of the second tablet practices is diaconal. This is very-well summed up in Luther`s *The Freedom of the Christian* (1520), where Luther highlights that a Christian lives 'in Christ through faith,' and 'in the neighbor through good works.' He or she is therefore a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none, and simultaneously a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all (LW 31:144).

Framing leadership in this way, is not merely arguing that a leader should explore and pursue the role of the servant. No, rather this treatment of leadership as a possible 'Christian' practice, highlights the purpose of leadership – the *telos*: The practice of leadership, including the appeal to a company`s legacy, the crafting of a powerful vision, and the actual process and practice of leadership should then be judged by how they serve the common good and the needs of the neighbour, or as Robert K. Greenleaf appeals to better leadership performance "for the public good" (Greenleaf, 2002, p.16). This attempt to interpret leadership as a possible 'Christian' practice even shapes our understanding of leadership as a relational practice: Does the practice of leadership, including its asymmetric, relational features, hold a diaconal character? This fixtures not simply the personal characteristics of the leader (as servant), but the qualities of the relationship.

The diaconal telos of leadership as a practice, then, implies that the goal of leadership must be to serve the good of the neighbour, perhaps even the common, or public good. But who is the neighbour, or the other? One may ask if there are there any limits to a diaconal telos, or does it include all of humankind? Put provocatively: Does the diaconal, serving purpose of leadership as a second tablet Christian practice extend to the stranger, and perhaps even the enemy? Obviously, there is not enough room to discuss this theme comprehensively, so let me here just note the following: In the 1541 treatise *Against Hanswurst*, Martin Luther listed refraining from revenge as a mark of the church, possibly drawing on Jesus` words in Matt 5:43-48. This may, quite radically, imply that the presence of Christ migrates to the encounter with your enemy – even in the practice of leadership (Norheim, 2014, p. 82-90), and Norheim, 2017).

One final puzzle or question remains, though. Gary Yukl, among others, defines leadership as a "process of influencing others" (Yukl, 2010, p.22). The simple question that follows from this dictum, is: Can it be 'Christian' to seek to persuade and influence others? Can the practice of influence be a Christian practice? Is not the attempt to influence others a violation of their autonomy? The answer is, of course, it depends. It comes down to both the mode of persuasion and the purpose of influence. According to ancient, classical ethical thinking, advocated by Plato and Aristotle against the Sophists, the art of persuasion (rhetoric) like all other arts, has to do with morality. When you speak to influence, your appeal to the audience to subscribe voluntarily to your *logos* should serve a higher goal: "truth, goodness, beauty, and above all, justice" (Norheim and Haga, 2022, p. 19; Norheim and Haga, 2022, 17-18). Once again, it becomes clear that the practice of leadership, the attempt to influence, must be evaluated by its purpose, its *telos*.

CONCLUSION

Before we conclude, a reflective remark on a sort of 'puzzle' when we discuss leadership as a possible Christian practice: If being a leader is inevitably linked to making followers, evaluating leadership as a possible Christian 'practice' comes with a certain paradox: To be a leader is to attract followers. However, being a Christian means being a follower.

Anyway, in this article I have analysed and discussed in which way and on what grounds it may be possible to interpret leadership as a Christian practice. Most definitions of leadership emphasize that leadership should be understood as a relational process or practice of influencing others to commit and dedicate themselves to future visions and goals (Yukl, 2010, p.26). However, the examination of current approaches to leadership, concluded that leadership remains a rather 'grey' or undetermined practice, much like the virtue courage, which can be used for both good and bad purposes.

Tapping into the emerging interest in practices, socially situated acts with sets of shared values, and internal and external goods, I went on to explore leadership as a 'practice' and more narrowly as a possible 'Christian' practice. Drawing on Alasdair MacIntyre´s appeal to Neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, contemporary, theological engagements to promote the importance of 'Christian practices,' and Martin Luther`s key Christological and ecclesiological assertions, I have argued that leadership as a possible 'Christian' practice should be assessed within a hermeneutical framework of four clusters of 'Christian' practices – first tablet practices, second tablet practices, adiaphora, and malpractices, which are violations of the second tablet 'Christian' practices.

Drawing on practice theory and Lutheran Christology, I concluded that leadership as a possible 'Christian' practice should be judged by its purpose, its *diaconal telos*: Leadership may be interpreted as a Christian practice insofar as the purpose of leadership as a relational practice serves the common good and the needs of the neighbour, perhaps even considering the needs of the stranger or enemy. This appeal contains more than a mere return to the key qualities of servant leadership, like empowerment, humility, and credibility. Rather, by focusing on the purpose of leadership, the 'grey' nature of leadership as a practice is honoured: Leadership is an open-ended practice of service, which may serve both good and bad purposes. Ergo, for the practice to pass as 'Christian' in any meaningful sense, the *telos* of leadership needs to be qualified as diaconal.

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