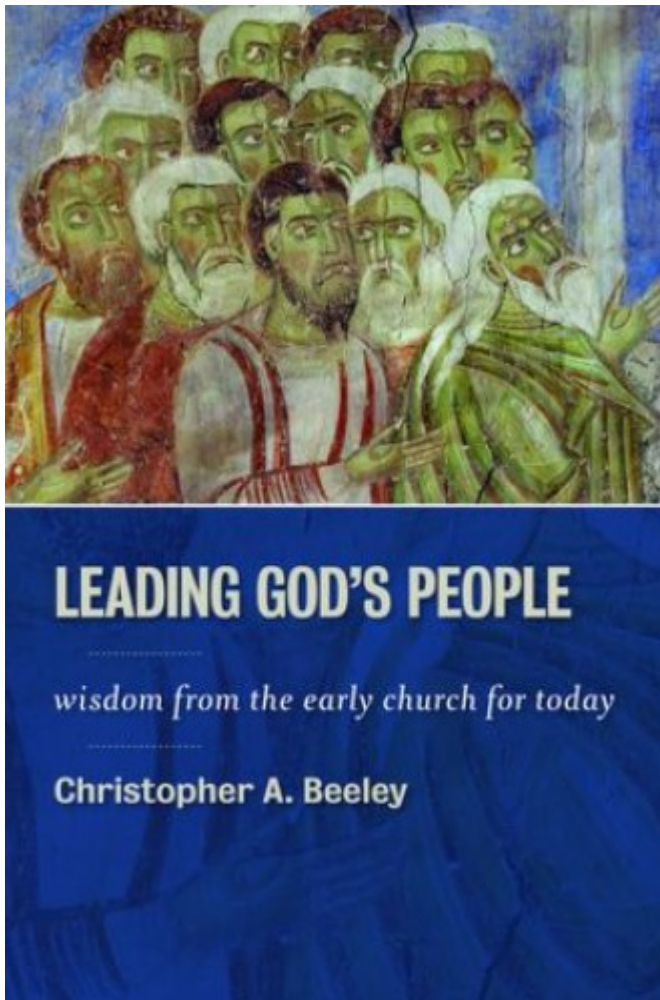


Leading God's People, by Christopher A. Beeley

reviewed by [Anthony B. Robinson](#) in the [August 7, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Leading God's People

by Christopher A. Beeley
Eerdmans

There may have been a time when being a pastor was a low-stress, high-status job, but no more. In these days of high-stress, low-status pastoring, clergy need reminders from leaders of the early church about the core purpose of their work, and

about its importance and its essential dignity and meaning. Christopher Beeley, an Episcopal priest and a teacher of patristics at Yale Divinity School, draws on the works of early leaders to deliver just such a reminder.

Many recent books on pastoral leadership are how-to guides that focus on techniques and strategies. *Leading God's People* is not that kind of book. Beeley is concerned with the ends, rather than the means, of pastoral leadership. He contends that "the main purpose of pastoral ministry is to guide people toward God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit." Therefore, "Everything we do as leaders should reflect this purpose." Pastoral leaders can easily forget what is most basic and essential amid the manifold pressures of a society and church driven by a consumer ethos and its definitions of success. Through numerical results may provide some important clues about how a congregation is faring, Beeley reminds us that "the spiritual condition of the flock is the only real measure of a leader's success."

Leading God's People is refreshingly different from many current books on leadership in that it is not concerned with what is the newest or most culturally relevant. Beeley looks all the way back to such teachers and theologians as Augustine, Chrysostom, John Cassian, Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory the Great. And he incorporates the voices of several women who were leaders in the early church, including Amma Sarah and Amma Syncletica.

From the works of these leaders Beeley extracts not only nuggets of wisdom but also words and insights that humanize the leaders and make them vivid as people. One of these humanizing bits is from Augustine: "When I expound the holy scriptures to you, it's as though I were breaking bread to you. For your part, receive it hungrily, and belch out a fat praise from your hearts." The quote appears in a chapter in which Beeley contests the conventional distinction between word and sacrament and speaks of the preached word as itself sacrament.

The leaders of the early church labored under no illusions about the difficulty of pastoring work or about the deviousness of the human heart, and neither does Beeley, who sets a high bar for pastors of the church. Clergy are not mere staff whose job is to keep everyone happy as though they are the crew on a cruise ship. Beeley understands, for example, that pastors ought to have and exercise authority, even though authority is sometimes misunderstood and misused. Beeley contends:

We should imagine pastoral leadership as both servant-like authority and authoritative service. This means that church leaders exercise their authority not by throwing their weight around, but by helping to build others up. And they serve others not by pretending they have nothing to offer, but by being real spiritual guides.

Beeley also writes freely about personal holiness, power and doctrine. He bluntly insists that “personal holiness is an essential requirement for aspiring and practicing pastoral leaders.” He understands, however, that holiness is not personal perfection but perfect reliance on God.

At a time when ministry seems dominated by functional goals and skills, Beeley argues that “church leadership is theological by definition” and that “week in and week out, the most practical thing that enables church leaders to minister well is our study of scripture and our theological rootedness.” Drawing on Ignatius and Augustine, as well as on scripture itself, Beeley notes the crucial importance of sound teaching. The biblical word for *sound* may also be translated “healthy.” And indeed, sound, healthy teaching is essential to congregational health.