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Up the Down Path: Power, Ambition, and Spiritual Leadership

Introduction

Bel Kaufman published *Up the Down Stairway* (1965) almost half a century ago—a book about a teacher, Sylvia, serving a difficult inner city school. She struggles with frustration over an incident in which a student was punished for going up a staircase that was intended for those traveling down. This incident initiates the case that Kaufman makes regarding institutional incompetence and mindlessness. The book does not deal with the possibility that a good and sound reason might exist for why students should not go up a stairway designed for going down? Strange though it may seem the biblical model of spiritual leadership deals with a similar question—up or down?

The Ascendant Model

Spiritual leadership offers similar options, up or down, and there are biblical rules that govern the directional choice—rules that have been and continue to be challenged by those who would travel their own way. The prophetic biblical narrative that foretells the rise and fall of the King of Babylon (Isa 14:3-11 NKJV) also includes a metaphorical comparison with the rise and fall of Lucifer (Isa 14:12-21). The ontology of spiritual leadership is revealed in this depiction of his coveting the throne of God or at least a place of parity at the throne with God. Note the ascendant language in this descriptive text:

The Rise and Fall of Lucifer

- ¹³ For you have said in your heart:
“I will ascend into heaven,
I will exalt my throne above the stars of God;
I will also sit on the mount of the congregation
On the farthest sides of the north;

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- ¹⁴ I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,
I will be like the Most High." (Isa 14:13, 14)

This egocentric upward focus is revealed in the use of the first person singular by the speaker, Lucifer (v. 12). His goals are not authorized nor has he been ordained to such lofty achievements, rather he personally covets a position and a role to which he was never called. Lucifer journeyed counter to the direction established by the kingdom of God by climbing up the ladder of his dreams and from that ladder he fell with tragic results:

- ¹² How you are fallen from heaven,
O Lucifer, son of the morning!
How you are cut down to the ground,
You who weakened the nations!
¹⁵ Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol,
To the lowest depths of the Pit. (Isa 14:12, 15)

There are consequences revealed in this prophecy that validate the prohibition against self-ascendancy.

Ezekiel continues this metaphorical message in his lamentation of the King of Tyre:

- ¹² Son of man, take up a lamentation for the king of Tyre, and say to him,
"Thus says the Lord God:
You *were* the seal of perfection,
Full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.
¹³ You were in Eden, the garden of God; . . .
¹⁴ You *were* the anointed cherub who covers;
I established you;
You were on the holy mountain of God;
¹⁷ Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty;
You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor;
I cast you to the ground." (Ezek 28:12-14, 17)

The Mountain of the Lord

The setting for both Isaiah's and Ezekiel's depiction of prideful self-promotion and ascendant behavior is the "mountain of the Lord" (Isa 14:13; Ezek 28:14). In both narratives the offender covets position and glory that were not his own and in both cases the consequences are tragic. The goal of this model of rulership or leadership is dominance while coercion is considered fair play as a means to achieve that end. We must remember though that there are universal spiritual rules that govern issues

of position and glory—in both of these biblical passages the characters assume an ascendant attitude inconsistent with divine laws that govern the universe. They went up the down path.

The Leadership Heritage of Gideon

Few are the parables found in the Law and Prophets section of the Bible but one of these rare literary pieces is found in the tragic tale of Gideon's son's (Judg 9:8-15). The record of Gideon's feats is dominated by his defeat of the Midianites (Judg 8) but he deserves notoriety for his paternal accomplishments as well—70 sons excluding daughters and children born to his concubines! These seventy sons will later play a role in a tragic demonstration of ambition gone mad.

In the shadow of his successful attack upon the Midianites the elders of Israel tempted Gideon to walk up the down path.

- ²² Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son's son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian."
- ²³ But Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you. (Judg 8:22, 23)

Gideon's response is a rare glimpse at the character of a man who was not motivated by the promise of position or power. It also reveals the unique leadership structure which seems to be God's preferred model for his people. I state this in the ongoing tense since an individual accountability to God through Jesus as priest and king is essential to the organization and structure of the early Christian church. It could be said of the early Christian period that there was no central governance structure in those days and every man did what was right according to the Word, the admonition of the Apostles and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

God Is Our Ruler

There was no centralized human leader in the time of the Judges and every man answered directly to the Creator as the leader of their nation. Each person behaved according to his or her personal commitment to the covenant of obedience and faithfulness to God (Judg 17:6; 21:25). This seems like a risky approach to corporate faithfulness and even national order but it was clearly Gideon's understanding of the governance structure of Israel—no human king! National faithfulness was simply an aggregate of the faithfulness of each Israelite. Lest we mistake the judges for centralized leaders in possession of corporate authority we should be reminded that the judges were charismatic figures who arose for specific

deliverance missions or assumed civil mediation responsibilities but had no governance authority or power to tax.

The placement of a king over Israel near the end of Samuel's prophetic service was seen by God as a rejection of him as their king (1 Sam 8:7). It was also a concession to the natural tendency of the human heart to exalt a human as the visible symbol of national leadership. The up path became a constant temptation as demonstrated by King Saul as he moved away from his spiritual calling and assumed an attitude of self-ascendancy which ultimately led to his rejection as king of Israel (1 Sam 13:10-14; 1 Chr 10:13-14). God's prediction to Samuel of the king's dominance over those served (1 Sam 8:11-18) was quickly and consistently realized throughout the rest of Israel's history under the kings.

The tendency to climb toward glory and honor seems to have been a constant temptation for those who served as king and those who wished to be king. It remains a blight on our planet as "protectors" who began their service of leadership with good intentions inevitably migrate toward assumption of the role of tyrant.

The examples of ascendant behavior that could be cited in scripture and secular history are multitude. The pain heaped upon humankind down through the ages by men and women committed to the ascendant model defies adequate description. It simply emphasizes the impact of the injection of Lucifer's leadership dominance-oriented behavior upon humankind in the period beyond the entrance of sin.

The Treachery of Selfish Ambition

Gideon's (we should note that Gideon is referred to as Jerubbaal in chapter 9) response to the elders of Israel provides a critical predicate to the parable of Judges 9 which begins with a conversation between one of Gideon's sons, Abimelech, by a Shechemite concubine and his maternal family. After struggling with the frustration of his ambition to become the principle leader he asks the question of his audience and in it reveals the source of his frustration: "Speak, now, in the hearing of all the leaders of Shechem, 'Which is better for you, that seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, rule over you, or that one man rule over you?' Also, remember that I am your bone and your flesh" (Judg 9:1, 2 NAS).

His desire to achieve rulership over Gideon's family was blocked by the fact that he was not among the "seventy sons of Gideon" since he was the child of a concubine, not the offspring of a wife. In addition, there were at least 70 options for the position vacated at Gideon's death and all seventy were ahead of him. As long as any of these 70 sons remained alive he had no chance of becoming ruler. He had begun his journey up the down path.

His appeal to the Shechemites was supported by the “flesh and bone” connection of family ties. His mother’s family provided both political and financial support that resulted in an ambush of Gideon’s sons at Ophrah wherein all 70 were murdered “on one stone” except for the youngest, Jotham, who hid himself and escaped the slaughter (Judg 9:5). The ascendant behavior of Abimelech reveals a ruthlessness toward his brothers that brings into question his “flesh and bones” argument used to woo the Shechemites. It was flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones whom he murdered on the rock at Ophrah.

A dominance orientation is always rooted in an exaggerated opinion of self and a marginalization of others. It opens the door for coercive behavior that engenders fear and force limited only in terms of what the character of the person will allow. In his bid for dominance Abimelech’s character allowed the most extreme coercion—deception and murder. The reward was his coronation beside the “oak of the pillar which is at Shechem” and the title of King.

The Parable of the Trees

Jotham’s response was both creative and courageous. From Mount Gerizim which faced Shechem from the southeast his voice called Abimelech and the Shechemites to account before God for their treachery.

- ⁸ Once the trees went forth to anoint a king over them, and they said to the olive tree, “Reign over us!”
- ⁹ But the olive tree said to them, “Shall I leave my fatness with which God and men are honored, and go to wave over the trees?”
- ¹⁰ Then the trees said to the fig tree, “You come, reign over us!”
- ¹¹ But the fig tree said to them, “Shall I leave my sweetness and my good fruit, and go to wave over the trees?”
- ¹² Then the trees said to the vine, “You come, reign over us!”
- ¹³ But the vine said to them, “Shall I leave my new wine, which cheers God and men, and go to wave over the trees?”
- ¹⁴ Finally all the trees said to the bramble, “You come, reign over us!”
- ¹⁵ The bramble said to the trees, “If in truth you are anointing me as king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, may fire come out from the bramble and consume the cedars of Lebanon.” (Judg 9:8-15 NAS)

The tree is a common metaphor for Israel and is here used in a most creative manner. The trees that go seeking a king are not identified as a species until the end of the parable where they become the victims of the “bramble’s” treachery. Knowing the species of the trees desiring a king is necessary for a clear understanding of Jotham’s intended message. For the

first tree approached is the olive tree, the second is the fig, third is a non-tree, the grape vine, and finally the bramble. All are significantly smaller than the cedar of Lebanon and thus incapable of fulfilling the request to “reign over” or “wave over” the cedar by virtue of their relative size.

The olive and fig both refuse the request for advancement on the basis of a clear recognition of their calling and personal satisfaction coming from the product their service provides. The move away from the realm of trees addresses Abimelech’s lack of formal son status which disqualifies him from service as the primary leader to replace Gideon. The vine, though not a tree, reveals wisdom common to both of the previous candidates. And all three knew what they were created for and were not successfully tempted to covet a role that was not theirs in order to gain power and the glory of position.

The bramble is a different sort of candidate. The bramble is lying in wait for an opportunity to dominate and rule. The bramble certainly has a legitimate purpose in the ecology of God’s creation but that purpose is not attended by the prestige or public honor that is granted to the olive, the fig, the vine, or for the Cedar of Lebanon. My southeastern United States heritage encourages a vision of the kudzu plant that certainly is not the species referenced in Judges 9 but without doubt it qualifies as a bramble of the highest order. It is opportunistic and voracious in its quest for dominance (Forseth and Innis 2004). It can grow as much as three feet on a warm summer day and has the capacity to envelop and kill trees by dominating the source of sunlight so completely that the tree starves. The bramble (regardless of species) provides no possibility of symbiotic advantage to the tree.

The bramble readily accepts the offer of kingship and just as readily follows with a threat of coercive dominance. A paraphrase of the response might be, “Yes, I will do it. In fact, if you don’t allow me to wave over you and be king I will personally destroy you by fire.” This eager acceptance and subsequent threat are both empty and shelter a tragic lie for the truth is that dominant coercive leadership brings decay and death. The tree that shelters under the bramble would never have suffered the promised fire but entering into a leadership relationship will result in death. There are thousands of trees in the southeastern United States that appear lush green and healthy but actually they stand dead beneath the leaves of the kudzu vine.

Abimelech ruled Israel for three years (Judg 9:22) but he is appropriately not remembered as Israel’s first king. He was betrayed and died at the hands of his own “flesh and bones” relatives—the Shechemites. Jotham, who escaped into exile, does not reappear thereafter in the biblical record but his brief appearance and the parable of the trees provides a

powerful testimony and insight into the danger posed by the ascendant self-centered leader who aims at power and position via dominance.

Down the Down Path

So what is the purpose of the “down path”? Let us revisit the Mount of the Lord to note that the dwelling place of God is on its heights. It is here that the “Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1:1). It was from this lofty site that Jesus began his journey of incarnation—“the Word became flesh” (v. 14). He became Emmanuel not by requiring us to ascend the Mount but by coming down to serve our transformational needs. He dwelled with us (v. 14), defied the strictures of polite Jewish society and ate with us—even with tax collectors and prostitutes (Matt 21:32), he was betrothed to the church even while she herself played the harlot (Hosea 3:1), and he laid aside the prerogative of position and announced that his preferred relationship was “friend” rather than “Master” (John 15:15).

The Incarnational Model

Jesus modeled the behavior of the down path—He emptied himself (Phil 2:7). The Greek, κενόω means “to completely remove or eliminate elements of high status or rank by eliminating all privileges or prerogatives associated with such status or rank—‘to empty oneself, to divest oneself of position.’ ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν ‘he emptied himself’” Phil 2:7 (Louw and Nida 1989:1:789).

The incarnational model of Jesus Christ sets the standard for leadership behavior by the Christian. Note that I did not say it is a standard for the church even though that would be true but the danger is that we might assume incarnational behavior only toward fellow believers. Incarnational behavior or walking down the down path if you will is our testimony of Christlikeness to the world. How we lead our families, our communities, our businesses, and work environments is the test that determines whether we are climbing the ladder of ascendancy to dominate or descending the path to serve. Our behavior toward others marks our leadership orientation—service or control?

Descending to Serve

Notice how frequently Jesus’ posture of service includes the element of descent: He sat *down* and taught them (John 8:2); He leaned down and healed them (Matt 15:30); He leaned down to place his healing hand upon the little girl (Mark 5:32); He came down and healed (Luke 6:17); He cast forth the demon from the child at his feet (Luke 9:42); Zacchaeus was called down to be with Jesus (Luke 19:5); He sat down with the Samari-

tan woman at the well (John 4:6); He stooped down to write the words that delivered the woman taken in adultery (John 8:6); Jesus looked down upon the paralyzed man and offered to heal him (John 5:6); He reached down to mix saliva with clay and anointed the blind man and he gained his sight (John 9:6).

Likely the most powerful expression of Jesus' descent to serve is recorded in John 13: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe *them* with the towel with which He was girded" (John 13, 3-5 NKJV).

In this act we have a clear statement of Jesus' expectation of us: "You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for *so* I am. If I then, *your* Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (John 13:13-17 NKJV).

Laws That Govern Leaders

Jesus was addressing men whom he had discipled to the expected end that they might lead the process of establishing his church on the earth—world class leaders who would within the first century stand at the head of a movement that changed the world forever. The expectation that spiritual leaders are called to walk down the down path could not be made clearer. We are not to function as rulers after the pattern of this world where "lording it over others" (Matt 20:25, 26) is not only accepted but often encouraged. Greatness comes from service, not dominance. Traveling up the down path not only dishonors the Master, it ends in disappointment, pain, and ultimately death. The greatness of Jesus Christ was established by coming down to serve and ultimately down to the grave. He became the ladder that connects heaven and earth (John 1:51). He never lifted himself up but rather asks us to lift him up in our words and in our living (John 12:32) as a means of making his transformational gift available to all.

The laws that govern traffic on the leadership path find their foundation in the law of love—love of God and fellowman (Matt 22:37-40). All other behavioral standards are nested in this great law—avoid selfish ambition and consider others before self (Phil 2:3); bear the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23); apply the "golden rule" (Luke 6:31) and all of the other dictates that govern relational behavior. Spiritual leaders are others-oriented and

the focus of their love, while appropriately honoring self, never obsesses upon self. Love is the motivator that urges us to descend to serve while all that we are apart from Christ urges us up the down path in pursuit of dominance and self-glorification.

The Passive Nature of Ascent

There are subtle implications present in the predictions by Jesus of his death. Note the passive tense applied to the salvific impact of his death on the cross: “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all *peoples* to myself” (John 12:32). He came down to serve but it would be others who would lift him up to die even though he approached his death willingly. The lifting up of the crucified and risen Jesus as a redemptive proclamation to the world is done in an active sense by his followers. He does not lift himself.

The upward movements of the Messiah at the end of his earthly ministry demonstrated a passive trust in others to lift him up. The resurrection of Jesus is presented in the scriptures as an act of God upon the body of Jesus with the apparent exception of John 10:17-18 where he claims possession of the power necessary to recover his life after his intentionally laying it down—a power available as a result of relationship rather than independent ownership. This submission to the power of the Father and the Holy Spirit again reveals a choice to ascend by being lifted up.

To the resurrection is added the clearly passive role he assumed in his ascension into heaven (Mark 16:19-20; Luke 24:50-51; Acts 1:9). He was “received up”; “carried up”; and “taken up.” Though he had every right to ascend on the strength of his own glory and power he chose to demonstrate his “emptying of self” (Phil 2:7) of desire for glory and honor by avoiding any sense that ascending to the throne of God could be achieved by one’s own strength or will. Any semblance of the upward path was eschewed as he submitted himself to the Father and the Holy Spirit on his journey back to his place on the Mountain of the Lord. Like Lucifer in better times, Jesus was “established” by God in his rightful place upon the Mountain.

The Glorious Irony

There is a great irony contained in the narratives of these two models: the throne that Lucifer coveted (Isa 14:13) and which incited his rebellion is given to the redeemed children of God (Rev 3:21). While Lucifer is cast down from his ascendant climb, those who submitted to their Creator and a life of loving service are lifted up and granted the privilege to sit on the throne upon the Mount of God.

When we come to understand the striking difference between the two

models of leadership that have been observed upon the Mountain of the Lord we then have a dependable gauge by which we may assess ourselves as leaders. Our actions will either be up or down, generative or destructive, loving or uncaring. By God's grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit we may travel down the down path as we follow the footsteps of Jesus. In the wake of our spiritual leadership, transformed people will be found who are better off than when we found them—more capable of becoming leaders themselves (Greenleaf 1977:27).

Works Cited

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