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JERRY D. BREEDLOVE, JR.

THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF HUMILITY FOR TODAY'S LEADERS

Abstract: Using socio-rhetorical criticism and analysis, the author explores the inner-textual and intertextual texture of 1 Timothy 3:1-7. In particular the author draws out how the Apostle Paul's leadership requirement of not being a recent convert is less about the timing of a conversion to Christianity and more about the adverse effects of pride on the ability of a leader to lead in a healthy manner. In so doing, the author provides support and insight into the ways in which humility as an essential virtue is applicable to leadership in secular settings as well as Christian environments. Furthermore, the author strengthens the case by citing multiple points in secular leadership literature where humility is seen as a positive virtue as opposed to a vice. This is done in order to establish a basis for the encouragement of Christian leadership theorists and practitioners to continue their efforts to influence secular theories of leadership and the subsequent applications toward a Christian outlook.

Keywords: *Leadership virtues, humility, ethics, intertextual analysis*

Introduction

Aristotle taught that a truly virtuous person would claim great honors for believing he or she is worthy of them because of internal moral excellence. In opposition to this particular nuance of Aristotle's philosophy of virtue, Holloway (1999) argued that "this awareness of his own superiority of character . . . leads the great-souled man to look down upon other men" (p. 582), and that character such as this almost certainly has no place within a Christian framework of leadership. Even secular leadership theorists and practitioners have recognized this problem in the Aristotelian framework. In particular, Redman (1995) suggested that humility is a key aspect that needs to be present within a leader's makeup. This does not mean that a leader cannot have pride in a job well done, but it does mean such pride cannot be boastful, arrogant, or self-serving. Furthermore, when healthy pride manifests in a genuinely humble leader, it will point to the accomplishments of those on the leader's team

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rather than thrusting the leader into the limelight. Caulkins (2008) also recognized that humility in a leader does not mean the leader is not ambitious, but rather that she is ambitious for the organization's goals and not for personal gain and glory. This comports well with an oft-overlooked qualification for leadership in Paul's instructions to Timothy (1 Tim. 3:6).

Commentators abound who have sought to provide insight into the scriptural qualifications for leadership espoused by Paul in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. However, a careful review of many of these commentaries evidenced a particularly startling trend in their scope. The instructions Paul provided to young Timothy are regularly viewed only with a focus on providing leadership within the context of the Christian church (Black & McClung, 2004; Carson, France, Motyer, & Whenham, 1994; Lea & Griffin, 1992; Staton, 1998). While providing sound leadership within a local congregation is certainly the main thrust of this passage, an argument can be made that many of the biblical qualifications for leadership (eldership) apply in diverse settings both inside and outside of the local church. This is the basis for the current contention that there is an oft-overlooked (or at least seriously downplayed) qualification for leadership present in this passage. This qualification is the strong presence of the virtue of humility evidenced in the life of the leader.

Paul Sought Humility in Leaders

A casual reading of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 rapidly produces a list of biblical qualifications for those desiring to serve as elders and overseers within the Christian church. Eleven of the 15 qualifications for leadership referenced in the passage lend themselves quickly to leadership in any setting. Paul stated that leaders must be above reproach, sober-minded, self-controlled, and not greedy. The scandals with corporate giants such as Enron, Arthur Anderson, and WorldCom (among others) serve as strong evidence of what is possible when leaders lack these virtues (Smith & Walter, 2006), and little more need be said about them in this paper. Furthermore, that leaders should be respectable, hospitable, able to teach others, free from chemical dependency that would cloud judgment, not prone to violent outbursts, assertive but not quarrelsome, and have a solid reputation with organizational stakeholders outside of the organization is hardly a question with most leadership practitioners and theorists, and much has been written on these subjects. However, the qualifications concerning marriage, management of the leader's private affairs, how the children behave, and the relative timing of his or her conversion to Christianity seem out of place in leadership discussions outside of the church.

While I contend that all four of these last leadership qualifications have practical implications in any organizational setting, it is beyond the scope of

this paper to adequately address all of them here. Jesus clearly stated that if a person is faithless with small things he will be faithless in the greater things as well (Matt. 25:14-30), and this must suffice for the qualifications concerning marriage, household management, and submissiveness of children in order that attention can be given to the qualification of not being a recent convert. Of the 15 items listed within this particular framework of leadership, conversion to Christianity (let alone the relative timing of that event) is the most difficult to understand outside of church settings; this is likely because theorists and leadership practitioners tend to overlook why it is even listed for church leadership.

By utilizing the tools of socio-rhetorical criticism, a method of studying Scripture espoused by Robbins (2012), a more complete understanding of a passage can be gained. Two of the processes used within this method are inner-textual and intertextual analysis. The first to be discussed, inner-textual, seeks to discover the fuller meaning of the text through the texture of the passage via aspects of word placement (McCabe, 2008) as well as how those words present arguments and their aesthetic feel (Robbins, 2012). When analyzing the text in this way, it becomes apparent that Paul argued against placing a recent convert in leadership not because the timing of conversion mattered per se, but rather because pride and arrogance tend to creep in more readily among young believers. In other words, Paul appeared to be more concerned with leaders being humble than he was with how long they had actually been in the faith. To Paul, humility was a key character attribute for a leader to have. However, a simple inner-textual analysis such as this forms an inadequate basis for an entire argument. This is where intertextual analysis enters the equation; as a result, the argument in support of humility grows exponentially.

According to Robbins (2012), a fuller understanding of Scripture can be gained by studying the interdependent ways in which the biblical texts stand in relation to one another. In other words, what the rest of the canon of Scripture has to say about a subject will help us to interpret a particular pericope more effectively. This can happen as sections of Scripture within a particular book of the Bible are read in light of one another, and can even be accomplished by comparing multiple passages from different books and even different covenants (Old vs. New).

Comparing 1 Timothy 3:6 with 4:12 yields interesting results, because Timothy is told in the second passage not to allow those he is leading to despise him for his youth. Rather, he is to set an example for those under his charge on how they should conduct themselves in their day-to-day lives. The implication in this second passage is that Timothy is a more recent convert (or at least less experienced) than some of the men and women he is to lead.

Rather than reacting negatively, “the apostle maintained that Timothy’s [humility in] speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity win over his despisers” (Campbell, 1997, p. 204). Though this further cements the idea that humility was ultimately within view for Paul in the original passage under consideration, it is still not enough. Further intertextual analysis is needed in order to make a more complete argument.

Throughout the epistles that Paul wrote, the theme of humility is presented over and over again. In Philippians 4:12-13, Paul argued that his personal trials and tribulations worked humility in his life, and he considered this to be an essential aspect of his dependence on Jesus Christ. In Colossians 3:12, the apostle urged his readers to put on humility as an essential habit of character (virtue), and he did this again in Ephesians 4:2. Furthermore, Paul explained to his readers in 2 Corinthians 11:1-15 that humility is an essential element for the character of a leader—humility that put the needs of others ahead of his own (v. 7). All of this was not based in some new understanding of humility as an essential leadership virtue; rather, it was based in Paul’s understanding of the Jewish Scriptures and the example set when Jesus humbled himself by accepting death on a cross (Phil. 2:1-11). This can be shown through further intertextual analysis utilizing the Old Testament.

Humility as an Essential Trait of Leaders in the Old Testament

Acts 22:1-3 is one of the most direct places in the New Testament where the Apostle Paul argues that his understanding of God’s will is thoroughly grounded in the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament. In this passage Paul actually appeals to his Jewish heritage as a basis for his audience to trust him. Polhill (1992) explained Paul’s argument in this way:

Paul’s use of their [the Jews] native tongue underlined his Jewishness and brought a hush over the crowd (v. 2). Paul then showed how his early life was in every respect that of a strict, practicing Jew. He was born in Tarsus, reared in Jerusalem, and educated under Gamaliel (v. 3). “Born, reared, educated” was a fixed biographical formula common in Greek writings. The significance to this is that when Paul referred to his being “brought up” in Jerusalem, the most natural meaning is that he was reared from childhood in Jerusalem, not in Tarsus, as is commonly supposed. His family must have moved to Jerusalem when he was still quite young. This ties in with the later reference to his nephew’s being in Jerusalem (23:16). It underscores the point Paul wanted to make to the Jerusalem crowd: he was no Diaspora maverick but was nurtured from childhood in the holy city itself. (pp. 457-458)

The interplay between this passage (Acts 22:1-3) and Paul’s writings help readers understand that intertextual analysis between passages in the Old and

New Testaments can and should be undertaken. In other words, Paul saw the New Covenant available through Jesus' blood not as an abolishment of all he had previously learned, but rather as a fulfillment through which he can and should seek to understand all that had previously been written. With this in view (the Old Testament's continued relevance), what is written about humility as an essential trait of leadership?

A relatively brief search of the Old Testament yielded a plethora of results regarding humility as an essential virtue. The book of Proverbs contains many of those results: Proverbs 3:34 states that God grants favor to the humble while resisting those who are proud and scornful, Proverbs 11:2 builds the case for humility as a pathway to wisdom, and Proverbs 29:23 records that real honor is only available for those who are genuinely humble. Paul, having been reared in the Jewish traditions, would have been taught that "the theological significance of the Book of Proverbs rests in its clear affirmation that Yahweh brought 'wisdom' into existence, revealed it to man, and as a Guarantor upholds this moral order" (Waltke, 1979, p. 236). Furthermore, King Solomon's association with the book of Proverbs (1:1) clearly links all the wisdom it contains (including its elevation of humility as an essential virtue) into the realm of leadership (Lennox, 1998). For certain, Paul would have been indoctrinated into this worldview, and these texts would most certainly have influenced his writing in the New Testament as a result of being educated by one of the finest rabbis of his time (Acts 22:3).

Another major text, which certainly is worthy of bringing into the intertextual analysis, is 1 Kings 3:1-15. In this pericope it is recorded that King Solomon met with the Lord in a dream. During this dream it was granted to the king to ask of God whatever he wanted. In a significant act of humility, Solomon asked God to grant him wisdom that could be used in guiding the nation of Israel.

It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. And God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you."
(1 Kings 3:10-12, ESV)

Fontaine (1986) understood this exchange to be the culmination of the redemption of this ruler. Through this one act of humility and dependence upon God, Solomon set a precedent for humility as an essential character trait for every leader who would ever come after him, and Paul would certainly have written what he did in light of this fact.

While there are numerous other passages that could be analyzed, those above should serve as a sufficient amount to show that Paul would have seen

humility as an essential part of the character of any leader. While it may be tempting to restrict humility to a specifically Judeo-Christian context of leadership, it is important to note that Israel had been entrusted with the divine revelation of God that was intended to shape the entire world—not simply one people group. Wright (2010) lent his support to this viewpoint when he argued that Paul worked extensively to bring together various strands of Jewish thought in the expectation of fulfilling “Israel’s call to be light to the world” (p. 244).

With the above in mind, it becomes easier to see that Paul had more than the relative timing of a Christian conversion in mind regarding what qualifies someone for leadership. The timing of the conversion was only important in view of the larger effect it would have on deteriorating humility—an essential virtue for all leaders. If this were not the case, then all non-Christians would be disqualified from leading. However, we know that Paul’s repeated call for the church to pray for and obey non-Christian leaders negates this possibility (Rom. 13:1-7; Eph. 6:5-8; Titus 3:1-2; 1 Tim. 2:1-3). The only other alternative, the one most often employed, is that Christians would need to restrict 1 Timothy 3:1-7 only to church leadership. However, through the use of socio-rhetorical criticism this interpretation has been rendered tenuous at best, because God is clearly interested in redeeming all of mankind and its leaders (2 Pet. 3:9).

Humility in the Life and Work of the Modern Leader

How, then, should humility be evidenced in the life of a leader? This question is still not without one major difficulty. As was noted at the outset of the paper, specifically pagan philosophies often see humility as a negative instead of positive attribute. This viewpoint traces its roots to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, which, according to Loudon (2007), “unduly criticizes the humble person” (p. 636). Whether the criticism of a humble person is justified or not, the idea that humility is a vice rather than virtue (an idea that pagan philosophies entertain) points to the fact that humility is often primarily viewed only as a part of Judeo-Christian virtue based ethics. Because of this, Christians and non-Christians alike are tempted to dismiss humility as essential in secular contexts.

Wright (2010) addressed this phenomenon when he argued that “it would be odd if we were . . . to retreat, and declare that what the Christian says about Christian virtue has no point of contact with what the pagan says . . . neither overlapping nor impinging on one another” (p. 238). Yet this is what often happens. However, Wright further contended that all mankind is made in the image of God—not simply the Jews and Christians alone—and because of this even pagans can “articulate and respect, and sometimes even live up to, noble ideals” (p. 238). Even more, Wright effectively argued that this would produce massive areas of overlap in Christian and pagan virtue ethics, and thus

Christian leadership theorists can offer humility as a much-needed virtue for those attempting to exercise leadership outside of Christian contexts.

This brings us full circle to the introduction of this paper, where it was contended that the idea of humility as an essential virtue in the life of a leader is gaining traction in non-Christian (i.e., pagan or secular) leadership literature and practice. Wright was apparently correct in his assertion that secular and Christian virtue ethics theories have areas of overlap, and that the situation is ripe for Christian leadership theorists and practitioners to forge new inroads into non-Christian arenas. This can be done fully expecting that virtues such as humility can and will be received to some extent. With this problem now addressed, the time has come to answer the question, “How should humility be evidenced in the life of the leader?”

Kerfoot (1998) recognized how wonderful it is to experience success; however, as this occurs some leaders begin to believe and act as though this success was of their own making alone. This is the opposite of humility, and it is unfortunately easy to come by because, “as a culture, we have celebrated individual accomplishments over those of the group” (p. 238). She further argued that, in order to overcome this, the strategic use of humility should occur. A primary way a leader can accomplish this is to never accept credit or accolades for something the team has accomplished. Instead, the leader should give appropriate credit to whomever actually did the task. By using this practice, not only will people feel better about the work, but also the leader will gain more respect.

Kerfoot’s (1998) strategy comports well with biblical guidance on one practical application of humility. Paul exhorted the Corinthian church to engage in team-based ministry and leadership throughout his first epistle to them. In the twelfth chapter of the book, he specifically addressed giving credit to the member of the group that deserves credit, in full recognition of the interdependence that individual members have with one another. By doing this, each member of the team will be honored with that person, and in times of struggle they will struggle with them as well (1 Cor. 12:21-26). While at first this seems to be a large leap of logic (when one is honored all are honored and when one suffers all suffer), Kerfoot’s (1998) strategy helps clarify what Paul was implying. Giving credit where credit is due helps to solidify a team and encourages the members to see that “we are in this together” (i.e., organizational identification). This makes your victories my victories and your defeats mine as well.

While exploring the effects of transformational leadership theory (specifically the concept of organizational identification mentioned above), Effelsburg, Solga, and Gurt (2014) found that honesty and humility required even more humility (i.e., a virtuous cycle) within organizations, because it enhanced the

morale and willingness of followers to sacrifice personal identity in exchange for collective identity. The researchers explained it this way:

Our findings are relevant for leadership practice in even another respect—an ethical one, more precisely. Because of its capacity to induce self-sacrificing behavior, transformational leadership shall be complemented by an ethic of care for employees' welfare. Otherwise, it will run the risk of exploiting people's willingness to take on personal costs for company benefits. (p. 139)

In other words, when leaders displayed higher levels of humility, it often increased followers' willingness to place themselves in a position of vulnerability that could easily be exploited as they sacrificed their personal identity and wellbeing for organizational goals. This demonstrates that leaders must be careful to steward human resources in a humble way that looks out for the needs of the follower as the follower pursues organizational goals.

The idea that humility needs to manifest in genuine care and concern for followers is not a new concept. Jesus taught His disciples that it was a worldly practice to lord authority over followers, and it was not a practice they should adopt. Rather, biblical leaders should put the welfare of followers above their own (Matt. 20:25-28); this is clearly an act of self-sacrificing humility. Paul clearly understood this principle as having its roots in genuine humility, as evidenced by what he wrote to the church at Philippi in his epistle to them.

In the second chapter of this letter, Paul exhorted his readers to do nothing from selfishness, but rather to look out for others' needs over and above their own. That he saw this as an example of humility is beyond question because of the specific wording he chose. According to Paul, we should “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3-4). It is important to note that Paul did not see humility as abasing oneself only to be abused by others, nor did Jesus (John 18:19-24; 19:9-11). Leaders and followers alike can look out for their own interests as noted in the passage above; however, those interests are not to be used as an excuse to trample on others. This is critical because it specifically addresses a major Aristotelian objection to humility as a critical virtue. That objection is that a humble person (a small-souled man for Aristotle) robs himself of what he deserves by ignoring his own needs (Louden, 2007).

A final aspect of humility deals with how humility is displayed in and through verbal interactions. Exline and Geyer (2004) conducted a study in which participants were asked to identify humble behaviors and their effect on those who observed them. The researchers found that, contrary to dictionary definitions of humility as well as the Aristotelian view, humility was not associated with low self-esteem or self-abasing behaviors. Instead, the

researchers found that “[participants’] open-ended definitions of humility suggested substantial overlap with modesty. Almost half of participants (44%) used the word ‘modesty’ in their definitions or made reference to modest behaviors such as not bragging or not taking full credit for success” (p. 102).

This comports well with the personal example and teaching of Paul throughout his epistles. In Romans 12:3 Paul exhorted his readers to not think more highly of themselves than they ought to, but to view and conduct themselves with humility. That he saw this as having to do with more than just inner thoughts becomes obvious when 2 Corinthians 11 is in view. Here the apostle expounded upon the folly of verbal boasting as opposed to humility. He then showed how those who bragged about their ministry and leadership were actually playing the part of the fool because there is always someone who has a better résumé. He specifically links this to human foolishness in verse 17: “What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool.” Thus leaders should be careful not only of their specific actions but of their talk as well.

Conclusion

Exline and Geyer’s (2004) study revealed that humility still has a long way to go before being fully accepted into secular leadership theory and practice as an essential virtue. Though participants in the study held highly favorable views toward humility as a virtue, they viewed it somewhat less favorably in leaders. This shows that the Aristotelian view of humility, which finds its roots in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, is still alive and well in today’s secular culture. But what is perhaps more alarming is that this view appears to be creeping into Christian leadership settings as well. Exline and Geyer describe their study participants’ reactions: “When asked to imagine humble people occupying various social roles, they regarded humility as less of a strength in . . . leaders than in the other groups . . . which included religious seekers or leaders” (p. 109). This, however, does not mean that humility has lost its appeal for Christian theorists and practitioners. Instead, the researchers were careful to point out that it was the non-religious participants who saw humility less favorably in religious leaders—not participants with a Christian background. But what does this mean?

Wright (2010) cautioned that this overlap of pagan and Christian virtue ethics is fraught with inherent dangers. One such danger becomes apparent if practitioners allow secular approaches to influence Christian virtue ethics in equal measure to the Judeo-Christian Scriptures:

If there is no major distinction—if we can read Aristotle and Paul side by side . . . and learn from both with equal profit, and if we can contribute our two cents’ worth of wisdom to today’s questions of public morality

along with everyone else—then we have clearly taken a large step away from the world of the gospels and the epistles. (Wright, 2010, p. 241)

The warning is an echo of an earlier Pauline thought about what it means to be in the world but not of the world. Paul urged that Christians are to be a positive influence on the larger world as we bring God's ways to all of humanity (Col. 4:5-6), and in a clearly worded passage he let his readers know how this would be accomplished. Christians are to be transformed by the renewing of their minds in Christ Jesus rather than conforming to the patterns of the world (Rom. 12:1-2). This happens as they devote themselves to the proper study and understanding of Scripture that is evidenced by a lifestyle of good works (1 Tim. 4:13; Titus 3:14). In this manner, Christians will lay the groundwork for a suitable defense of Christian virtue ethics and the essential nature of the virtue of humility in the life of a leader—even those leaders who do not yet know Christ as Lord.

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