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Biblical Foundations of Christian Leadership: Part 1

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STANLEY E. PATTERSON
**BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN
LEADERSHIP, PART I**

Introduction

The biblical foundations of leadership begin to be laid in the first chapter of Genesis and conclude with the declaration of a kingly leadership position (Rev. 1:5, 6) for God’s people in Revelation. These books and those in between reveal the deeds and misdeeds of leaders throughout. We see the massive deterioration of leadership behavior in the rebellion of Lucifer against God, but we also observe the incredible demonstration of leadership in the descent of the Messiah into the greatness of transformational service.

The model demonstrated by Christ is a model of service. The followers of Jesus are called to serve as God’s stewards from a platform that is free of positional tension or self-ascendant attitude. As He emptied Himself of all desire for honor and glory (Phil. 2:7), so His followers are called to a leadership model marked by humility and powered by love. The competencies necessary for the ministries to which each one is called are provided by the Holy Spirit. The competencies are practiced in an interdependent manner with all other believers within the context of relational health that is also made possible by the Spirit of God. The reward of grace is revealed in the promise of Revelation 3:21, wherein we are promised a seat with Jesus on the throne of God—the very seat that was coveted by Lucifer.

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matt. 20:25–28, NIV)

A Mother's Love—Misdirected

What mother doesn't want the best for her children? What wouldn't a mother do to assure the success and reputation of those she labored in love to bear? Salome¹ (Matt. 20:20–21; Mark 10:35–37) respectfully approaches Jesus during His last journey to Jerusalem with a request on behalf of her sons, James and John. Kneeling before Him, she humbly makes a less than humble request, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

Jesus' response is interesting in that He does not respond directly to Salome at all! He turns His attention to her two sons. Given that Mark's account of this incident does not mention Salome, it is reasonable to assume that these two "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17) conspired to have their mother make the request for them. Jesus ignored the proxy voice and immediately directed the conversation to the two instigators by asking whether they were up to the challenge that He was facing—could they drink of the cup from which He was about to drink (v. 22)? They responded confidently and without hesitation—"Yes!" (v. 23).

It might be helpful to take a moment apart from this story and briefly assess the characteristics that might recommend James and John to positional leadership roles in most organizational contexts. They demonstrated courage and enterprise in crafting their approach to request advancement; their timing was well-considered in that Jesus was being quite clear that something was about to happen that would challenge the current structure of their discipleship community; they were leveraging existing relationships to accomplish a desired end; and they were decisive and confident in their ability to accomplish what was necessary to be effective in the positions to which they aspired. Not a bad recommendation, based upon the common profile expected of an emerging leader of promise. The biblical narrative does not, however, support that assumption.

The conversation continues with Jesus granting their request of sharing the cup from which He will drink (v. 23), but He informs them that He does not have the authority to determine who sits beside Him in those honored positions. It is in this statement that Jesus reveals a critical element in His leadership model—He maintains a team position with the Father and the Holy Spirit that has clearly defined roles for each. He is clear on the scope of His personal authority and that of the Father.

¹Comparison of Matt. 27:55–56 with Mark 15:40 leads to the plausible suggestion that Salome is to be identified with the woman who is also called 'the mother of the sons of Zebedee,' i.e., the mother of James and John, two of Jesus's most prominent disciples. This would also make her the wife of Zebedee, who appears to have been a moderately wealthy man, since he employed 'hired men' and owned a boat (Mark 1:20)" (Powell, 2011, p. 1124).

What is also clear is the immediate impact of the introduction of the possibility of positional ranking in the discipleship community—indignation and strife among the other disciples toward these two brothers. This should be read in the broader narrative of the New Testament issues related to Jesus, the disciples, and the leadership/organization model revealed in the Gospels. The incarnation was not wholly revealed in the physical change of Jesus becoming human flesh. It must be understood in the broader perspective of Jesus emptying Himself of all desire for position and honor (Phil. 2:7) in His effort to serve as our spiritual leader. He further flattens the structure of the discipleship community with the subsequent incredible announcement that He would henceforth relinquish the title of “Master” and assume the preferred relational designation of “friend” (John 15:15). He creates a flat leadership community.

The natural social tendency is to gradually sort out the characteristics and behaviors within a community until rank issues are determined and all members find their unique place in the group. Leadership roles, if not assigned, will emerge through this sorting process. The persistent question of “who is the greatest” was never answered by the imposition of a hierarchical structure in the discipleship community. It remained flat and unranked with Jesus at the center. The introduction of positional ranking immediately introduced issues of jealousy and strife, because it violated what had for three and a half years functioned as a community of equals led by One who chose to become like those He led.

The reaction to James’ and John’s proposition prompted Jesus to gather the whole group together for a teaching moment:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.
(Matt. 20:25–28)

Jesus leverages the moment of angry reaction to the suggested ascendance of James and John to connect them with the larger issue of dominance and ascendant behavior. Though many respected translations of this verse use the word *Gentile* as the appropriate translation of *ethnon* (εθνων), it may legitimately be translated “peoples.” If *ethnon* (εθνων) is understood as peoples, then Jesus’ listeners have a problem—they are people! Translating *ethnon* (εθνων) as “Gentiles” lets the Jewish people off the hook, and consequently the disciples themselves since they are Jewish. “Not so with you” (v. 26) requires a search for an alternative that does not exist in the behavior of people—even the Jews. If the Greek source word (εθνων) is translated “people,” then the solution lies in a dimension outside of sinful humanity.

Jesus abandoned the throne on the heights of the heavenly Mount Zion in a

bid to serve the salvation needs of the human race. He did so by making selfless generative service His mantra. He came down to serve (Mark 10:45; John 1:14). In this story of Salome, her two sons and a group of offended disciples are asked to consider the mantle of service even to the point of suffering to and for others as the purpose of being leaders in the kingdom of God. Accepting this mantle requires embracing a model of leadership that is radically different from what is commonly held to be leadership. Some reject it as being totally upside down from what is deemed appropriate and necessary to qualify as leadership.

It is from this story that we launch a journey into the biblical passages that make up the footings of spiritual steel and hardened concrete—a foundation for building a Christian model of leadership.

Historical Background

The influence of Judeo-Christian teachings on social models of order, governance, management, and leadership is pervasive. Social norms of male headship, privilege of the firstborn, stewardship, shared and distributed leadership models, and leadership ethics are embedded in the leadership ethos and behavior of many cultures around the globe. Though most of these elements have been radically interpreted at times, in certain cultures the root concepts are embedded in the biblical narrative.

The elemental characteristics of the God/man relationship are defined in the covenants (Gen. 12:1–3; 17:4–6; Jer. 31:31–34; Heb. 8:7–13). God promises to be our leader. His leadership promises permanent relationship with Him (Heb. 8:10), transformed hearts (Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10), forgiveness (Jer. 31:34), ultimate prosperity (Gen. 12:3; 32:12; Ps. 72:7), ultimate security (Ps. 4:8), and descendants—either physical or faith community (Gen. 22:17; Heb. 11:12). Gideon acknowledged this leader/follower relationship for what it was—God is ruler (Judg. 8:23) and His people follow in obedience. But God requires of the people more than blind obedience. He expects leadership of those He has called—service as a faithful steward through whom “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:3).

The making of leaders is a primary objective in God’s plan, as opposed to designating a few leaders and a mass of compliant followers. “Leading” the people of this planet to the person of Jesus Christ is a call to all who believe. To do so requires first that His people are passionately committed to following Him. Christians are by definition followers of Jesus—always. Concurrently, they are processed through discipleship to become effective leaders as a part of the mission strategy to declare Him to the world.

Biblical Perspectives

Since we are building a biblical foundation for leadership models, we need to return to “In the beginning.” Genesis provides no clear dedicated statement of what leadership behavior looked like prior to mankind’s fall into sin (Gen. 3). We can, however, catch glimpses that give us significant insights into how God accomplished tasks prior to that time. The first verse of Genesis introduces us to the Creator by using the name *Elohim*, which is a plural form of the name for God. This is often missed in the English reading of this verse, since the plural element is not translated. The intent of the term is that the earth was created by what we commonly refer to as the Trinity—the divine community.

Christian teachings did not emerge in a vacuum, but in a rich and varied historical context. History prior to the record of the rebellion of Lucifer (Isa. 14:12–15; Rev. 12:7–9) is sketchy, but enough exists to provide critical background to Jesus’ teaching related to leading and leadership behavior. Doukhan (2014) expresses the inclusion of the leadership dimension in the creation narrative of Genesis 1:

The first word of the Hebrew Bible *bereshit*, generally translated “in the beginning” (Gen 1:1), encapsulates the essence of leadership: it is derived from the word *rosh*, which literally means “head” and is the technical term normally used to designate one who is leading in a given situation. The event of creation is thus from the start described as an act of leadership. Creation is leadership par excellence. (p. 31)

The creation story grants us a glimpse that reveals nothing that would indicate the presence of dominance-oriented behavior or the aspirations of ambition that would spawn it. “In the beginning God created . . .” (Gen. 1:1) gives no hint of the distinct positions or roles held by the members of the Godhead—no ranking or hierarchy that would betray a prior process of establishing dominance or role. There was a consistent sense of oneness wherein no one member of the Trinity was elevated or abased relative to another. The expression “Let us make man in our image” (Gen. 1:26) reveals the planning aspect of creation as a conversation rather than a command. Doukhan (2014) goes on to discuss the question of who is in conversation:

Generally Jewish tradition held the plural to refer to God addressing His heavenly court, the angels, as supported by Job: “when I [God] laid the foundations of the earth . . . all the sons of God shouted for joy” (Job 38:4, 7). An important Jewish tradition reported by the great medieval commentator Rashi explains this text as a lesson of humility on the part of God: “The superior must take counsel and ask authorization from his inferior.” The text of the *Midrash Rabbah* which is the source of Rashi’s remark is even more explicit and reports the story that when Moses received this phrase by revelation he was disturbed and asked God to

explain. And God answered: “Since man will be the lord of creation, it is appropriate that I ask their agreement to the higher and lower spheres, before I create him. Humans will then learn from Me that the greatest should ask the agreement from the smallest before imposing on him a leader.

From the time of the Church Fathers, Christian theologians in general saw the plural as a reference to Christ or/and the Trinity. Certainly the traditional Christian interpretation would not exclude the traditional Jewish interpretation, insofar as the divine council (the heavenly host) is understood in a broad and larger sense, though with some nuances. In the former interpretation, the sharing operation involves other beings than God Himself. In the latter interpretation, it takes place within the Godhead and is here understood as an inherent quality of God Himself. (pp. 38–39)

The majority Christian view reveals a discussion between equals where a suggestion regarding the nature and/or appearance of man as being somehow similar or like God is adopted and carried out by the collective Godhead without addressing the issue of dominant voice or position. No one person is given credit for the suggestion nor does the context seem to expect that the recommendation needed to be credited to an individual member of the Godhead.

Though the New Testament attributes creation responsibility to Jesus (John 1:3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2, 10), the creation account mentions the activity of God in a plural sense. The plural nature of the Godhead is revealed in the creation narrative in that the Spirit is mentioned specifically as an active agent in the creation process (Gen. 1:2). It seems that the credit given to Jesus as Creator is assumed to extend to all three members of the Trinity.

Jesus described the nature of the relationship of the Trinity (John 14) to His disciples as a radical oneness (John 14:7–18) to the degree that it allowed Him to use the first person singular pronoun “I” when clearly referencing the presence and activity of the Spirit (John 14:18). He reminds Thomas and Philip that He and the Father share this oneness to the extent that seeing one allows for the recognition of the other (John 14:7, 9). Further, His followers are included in this radical oneness which defies physical reality—“I am in the Father, you are in me and I am in you” (John 14:20).

This spiritual oneness leaves no room for competitive behavior. Dominance and the dance to attain prominence over others is simply not an issue that is revealed as being present in the cosmos prior to Lucifer’s rebellion. The poetry of Isaiah 14:13–14 reveals the origins of the ascendant-dominant element in leading people. The prophetic biblical narrative that foretells the rise and fall of the King of Babylon (Isa. 14:3–11) also includes a metaphorical comparison with the rise and fall of Lucifer (Isa. 14:12–21). The origin of leadership as self-ascen-

dancy that aims at attaining dominance for self is revealed in this depiction of his coveting the throne of God, or at least a place of parity at the throne with God.

This story and the consequences arising therefrom impact leadership behavior and practice more than any other event in history. It is the story of an angel, Lucifer, created with great gifts of service and leadership, who inexplicably began to feel envious toward the God who created him. Though his position was that of “the guardian cherub” (Ezek. 28:14) and he was ordained by God to live and function in a position next to God Himself, he began to doubt the love and wisdom of God to a degree that he coveted the very throne of God. War followed. This war dramatically and tragically impacted life on our planet. Humans, who had been entrusted with leading planet earth, were influenced to side with Lucifer in this conflict, which altered their very nature and thereby indelibly impacted behavior—particularly leadership behavior.

Isaiah the prophet quotes the divine account of the thoughts of Lucifer as he contemplated his rebellion against God:

I will ascend to the heavens;
 I will raise my throne above the stars of God;
 I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,
 on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon.
 I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;
 I will make myself like the Most High. (Isa. 14:13–14)

The verbs and the pronouns within these lines of poetry reveal much about the core elements of his philosophy—“I” is the prominent pronoun and ascendancy is the overriding direction of his movements. Within this vision of his future, Lucifer reveals negative dimensions that trouble many within the context of leadership. His intense self-centeredness contrasts with the generative attitude of the Creator, characterized as a giver who blesses and enhances the lives of others. We also see the seeds of competition for primacy that germinate in his heart and bear the fruit of dominance and control throughout the history of the human race—war, murder, conflict and slavery, to name but a few.

The desires of Lucifer’s heart, as recorded in this Isaiah 14 poetry, have been passed on to all who make this earth their home. Their influence on what passes as leadership is ubiquitous and provides the foundation for leader behavior throughout most of human history. Power and force replaced the cooperative conversations that led to task accomplishment in the previous era, where the influence of Lucifer’s rebellion was unknown. Great Man Theory² as a model for leadership went unchallenged for most of earth’s history until challenged by Jesus. He condemned the wickedness of

²Great Man Theory is the idea, popularized by Thomas Carlyle in the 1840s, that history hangs (largely) on the “impact of ‘great men,’ or heroes; highly influential individuals who, due to either their personal charisma, intelligence, wisdom, or political skill utilized their power in a way that had a decisive historical impact” (“Great man theory,” Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/>).

Capernaum (Luke 10:15) by referencing the language of Isaiah 14—self-ascendant behavior that mocked the God of creation. He inverted the common wisdom of leadership by characterizing the great men as slaves (Matt. 20:26–27) and recalibrating our sense of what it means to be a leader by inverting first with last (Matt. 19:30; 20:16; Mark 9:35).

In the eschatological passage of 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4, Paul clearly references competition born of a covetous heart that hopes to occupy the throne of universal leadership as the sin that will mark the time just before Jesus returns at the end of earth's history. These passages bracket the history of leadership on this earth after the rebellion of Lucifer and the moral fall of mankind.

Hierarchies of power emerged as the structures that formalized Lucifer's self-ascendant move toward dominance and control. Ambition that motivates coveting of positional dominance finds its origins in the cosmic rebellion initiated by Lucifer and presages the murderous treachery of the likes of Abimelech toward Gideon's 70 sons (Judg. 9:1–5), the attempt at dominance initiated by Salome for her sons (Matt. 20:24), the arguments among Jesus' disciples as to who among them was the greatest (Luke 22:24), and countless other cases that stain the history of the human race.

The Hebrew nation alone functioned without a centralized human ruler up until the final years of Samuel's role as judge and prophet. The absence of a physical ruler was a problem for the Israelites before and during the period of the Judges. Idol worship emerged as a persistent problem as they endeavored to fill the physical vacancy that accompanied their covenantal leader who led from a spiritual but physically intangible dimension. The persistent press for a king was likewise associated with a preference for the physical over the spiritual. Centuries later, this dissatisfaction raised its head again as the early church struggled with the absence of Jesus and the need to depend upon a spiritual leader in the person of the Holy Spirit. This tension of absence eventually led to the consolidation of authority in human clergy, which reached its zenith in the supreme ascendancy of the Bishop of Rome and the papacy. Jankiewicz (2013) makes this observation:

Faced with the reality of the physical absence of Christ on earth, the post-Apostolic Church felt it needed someone who could take His place, represent Him to believers and the world, and represent believers to God. Viewing themselves as separated for special ministry via the rite of ordination, early Christian ministers assumed the position of headship in the church in place of Christ. This is the actual meaning of the widely used Latin phrase *in persona Christi Capitis* (in place of Christ the Head). Another phrase, *Vicarius Filii Dei* (in place of the Son of God), expresses the same belief. (p. 29)

After years of resisting, God, the invisible spiritual ruler that Gideon

affirmed when he was asked to be king of Israel (Judg. 8:22, 23), allowed the installment of a human king. Positional governance thus replaced the Divine-human relational structures of Israel's covenant with God. It is critically important to the formation of an understanding of God's leadership ideal that we recognize that kingly administration was not originally included in that model. God predicted that it would become a part of their future (Deut. 17:14f) because He knows the tendency of the human heart. The covenant relationship of God with His people established Him as ruler and the people as followers and stewards of His authority on earth, but the kingly model was an accommodation to the desires of His people to have a tangibly visible human leader presence.

The demise of the theocracy was initiated by a request of the elders of Israel for a king "like all the nations" (1 Sam. 8:20). The subsequent act of choosing a king for Israel was accompanied by a warning from God through Samuel: He predicted that the king would rule (1 Kings 8:9, LXX; Rahlfs, 1971) with complete control (βασιλεύσει) (Louw & Nida, 1989) and that his subjects would eventually bemoan their request for a king (1 Sam. 8:11–18). In summary, the ubiquitous nature of dominance as the primary underlying leadership behavior of the fallen human race has its origins in the rebellion of Lucifer and has been present to a greater or lesser degree in all leader-follower relations since.

Leadership in the Disciples' Community (Matt. 20:20–28)

The social dynamics at play in Matthew's narrative of Salome's request reveal a predictable response to the interjection of a process of positional dominance into a relational social context. To this point in time the disciples had related as peers while Jesus served as the central alpha figure apart from formal position and in whom they freely acknowledged authority. The mother of James and John interjected the possibility of a new social order among the disciples based upon positional rank as would be dictated by Jesus. The request that her sons occupy the preeminent positions to the right and left of Him (Matt. 20:20–21) contain three assumptions: (1) that Jesus possessed the authority to speak (εἶπέ) and it would happen (Great Man Theory), (2) that the organizational structure of the community built around Jesus would be ordered according to the familiar hierarchical structures that marked the world around her (power-based and top down), and (3) that the relational structures that held the community together and by which it functioned were inadequate without hierarchy.

Jesus challenged the first assumption in His response by claiming that granting positional rank to the disciples was not His to give (v. 23), but the Father reserved the right to determine the role of each. Though He did not

defend the relational nature of His community, He gave no hint that it needed the imposition of hierarchical power structures. The third assumption is undone during Jesus' earthly ministry by the clear absence of formal positional ranking among the disciples.

The injection of rank and position into the disciple community by this mother caused an immediate negative emotional reaction toward James and John by the other disciples (v. 24)—dominance through social competition for position. Mark's account, "they began to be" (Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown, 1921, Mark 10:41), indicates that the tension created had its beginning here but continued on in their relationships. This incident illustrates the role dominance plays as a primary source of conflict in the church and elsewhere—perennial relational stress resulting from competition for positional honor and influence. This reality mirrors the initial cosmic rebellion and conflict between God and Lucifer memorialized in the words of Isaiah—"I will ascend" (Isa. 14:13).

It is in this context that Jesus contrasts the leadership behavior of the rulers of the people or nations (ἀρχοντες τῶν ἐθνῶν) (v. 25) who anticipate becoming great. Again, this language reinforces the ubiquitous nature of dominance behavior as a negative element of leadership. It is ironic that His followers who are receiving this counsel are embroiled in such behavior at the moment His words reference it. This ubiquity is not confined to the Gentiles only but is the *modus operandi* of Jewish leaders as well—both political and religious. Jesus expands His counsel to include the great or important ones (μεγάλοι), those who exercise authority (κατεξουσιάζουσιν) that comes from the top down to subjects or authoritarian leadership rather than the generative authority in the more positive demonstration of authority (προΐστημι) (Vincent, 1887; 1 Pet. 5:3; 1 Thes. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17). In contrast, Jesus counsels His followers that those who anticipate becoming great (θέλη εἶναι) must first descend into servitude to accomplish that end.

The contrast comes forward implicitly in Jesus' directive to His disciples that such behavior will not be demonstrated by those who follow Him. This statement of the ideal confronts both the positional maneuvering of James, John and their mother, and the anger that welled up among the other 10 disciples in reaction to James' and John's bid for prominent position on either side of Jesus. What it does not do is describe the positive alternative. Here we have authoritarian leader behavior that Jesus identifies as universal among the people and which He condemns as unacceptable among His followers, but contrasted with what? If authoritarian leadership behavior is universal, then we must move to a different dimension to discover the model that contrasts with the autocrat or authoritarianism. The non-competitive, collaborative,

interdependent leadership model that is captured and revealed in the context of creation and in Eden prior to the Fall is the only viable alternative. This ideal was not yet a reality among the followers of Christ but was, by faith, within reach of this fledgling community.

Oneness with Christ now goes beyond the relationship dimension and embraces an identity and behavior consistent with that of the Trinity. Even as the greatness of Jesus the Christ was experienced by means of emptying Himself of desire for honor and glory (κενόω, Phil. 2:7), so also, the believer who would become great is encouraged to find greatness as a servant (διάκονος, Matt. 20:26). Those who desire primacy (James and John) have the greater challenge of passage in that they must become slave (δοῦλος) to the other believers—a mighty challenge when contrasted with the mental models upon which their social understanding of position and leadership were based.

The narrative concludes with Jesus referencing Himself as their example (cf. 1 Pet. 5:3) in that He left His place in glory and descended to serve to the degree that His life would be forfeited in order to serve the transformational process of granting salvation and eternal life to those captured in the grip of sin and death. The contrasting model that faces off against the ascendant-dominant model of leadership may be found only in the descendant-service model demonstrated in the persons and relationships of the Godhead.

To be continued in the next issue.

Reflection Exercise

1. The contrasting models represented by Lucifer's ascendant-dominant model revealed in Isaiah 12 and Ezekiel 28 and that revealed in the New Testament depiction of Jesus' incarnation and life of dedication create a paradox for people regarding authority and accountability. Jesus indicated that leaders must be last, and the great will be as slaves. Where does my accountability come from, if I lead as a servant (from above, or below, or both)? I was born looking up for authority and up for accountability (Mom and Dad). To what extent can I trust my natural intuition relative to authority and accountability if I am committed to being a disciple of Jesus as a leader?

2. Assume that you are a part of the body of Christ and belong to a congregation where each one has received different spiritual gifts for ministry. Do you need to ask permission in order to exercise your spiritual gift? In what ways does the pastor of the church serve as a manager of the collective spiritual gifts of the church? How extensive is the pastor's personal authority? How can he or she ever legitimately proclaim, "Do it because I said so!"?

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