AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONTRAST OF CHRISTIAN WITH

SECULAR LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR

Stanley E. Patterson, PhD

Introduction

This study of Christian leadership behavior will launch from a statement by Jesus

recorded in Matthew 20:25-28 that references the contrastive difference between secular and

Christian behavior. The specific behavior addressed relates to the determination of social order

prompted by dominance-oriented ambition. Jesus' counsel in this text is quite direct in its

contrast of Christian and secular social behavior while the majority of biblical literature relating

to leadership behavior requires interpretive work to determine the implications for Christian

leaders. The fact that Jesus was aware of the specific differences mentioned here prompts the

question of what other expectations exist for the Christian leader who wishes to behave in a

manner consistent with Jesus' desires. What implications for Christian leadership behavior

emerge from the teachings of Jesus?

The discovery of these contrasts will require comparison of roles and tasks in both

Christian and secular contexts which will undoubtedly reveal behaviors common to both. The

intent of this paper, however, is to report those behaviors which contrast, thus revealing

distinctive expectations for those who are committed to reflecting Christian values.

Historical Background

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 (Is 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 (2012, p. 1) expresses the inclusion of the leadership dimension in the

creation narrative of Genesis 1 thus:

> 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.

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 (2012, p. 1) discusses the question of who is in conversation:

> Generally Jewish tradition held the plural to refer to God addressing His heavenly court, the angels,[i] 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."[ii] 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.[iii] 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.

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.

Though the New Testament attributes creation responsibility to Jesus (Jn 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).

Jesus described the nature of the relationship of the Trinity (Jn 14) to his disciples as a radical oneness (Jn 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 (Jn 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 (Jn 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" (Jn 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 (Patterson, 2013).

> The prophetic biblical narrative that foretells the rise and fall of the King of Babylon (Is 14:3-11) also includes a metaphorical comparison with the rise and fall of Lucifer (Is 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. (p. 3)

Hierarchies of power emerged as the structures that formalized Lucifer's self-ascendant move toward dominance and control. Ambition that motivates coveting positional dominance finds its origins in the cosmic rebellion initiated by Lucifer and presages the murderous behavior

of Abimelech toward Gideon's sons (Jdg 9:1-5); the attempt at dominance initiated by Salome for her sons (Mt 20:24); the arguments among Jesus disciples as to who among them was the greatest (Lk 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 for Israel as they endeavored to fill the physical vacancy that accompanied their covenantal leader who led from a spiritual dimension. The persistent press for a king was likewise associated with a preference for the physical over the spiritual. This dissatisfaction raises 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 eventually led to the consolidation of authority in clergy which reached its zenith in the supreme ascendency 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. (pp. 8-9)

After years of resisting, the invisible spiritual ruler that Gideon affirmed when he was asked to be king of Israel (Jdg 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.

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 that predicted the king would "lord it over" (κατακυριεύω) his subjects who would eventually bemoan their request for a king (1 Sam

8:11-18). 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.

Matthew 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. The disciples 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 (vss. 20-21) contain three assumptions: 1) that Jesus possessed the authority to speak (εἰπέ) and it would happen; 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; 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 (vs. 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. This issue will be addressed later in this paper.

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, Mk 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—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" (Is 14:13).

It is in this context that Jesus contrasts the leadership behavior of the ἄρχοντες τῶν ἐθνῶν— (the individual components of hierarchy) the rulers of the people or nations (vs. 25) who anticipate becoming great. Again this language reinforces the ubiquitous nature of dominance behavior as a model 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 μεγάλοι, the great or important, who exercise κατεξουσιάζουσιν, authority that comes from the top down to subjects or authoritarian leadership rather than the generative authority in the more positive προΐσταμαι (Vincent, 1887, 1 Pet 5:3). In contrast, Jesus counsels his followers who anticipate becoming great (θέλη εἶναι) must descend into servitude to accomplish that end (Vincent, 1887, Mt 20:26).

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 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 (κενόω, Phil 2:7) so that the believer who would become great is encouraged to find greatness as a servant (διάκονος) (vs. 26). Those who desire primacy (James and John) have the greater challenge of passage in that they must become δοῦλος, or slave 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.

1 Peter 5:1-5

One of the 10 who heard these words while still emotionally heated over the proposal of James' and John's mother was Peter. He echoes the counsel of Jesus referenced above in his first epistle:

> The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: [2] Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; [3] nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; [4] and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.

It is in this word of counsel that we are able to see the wisdom of Matthew 20:25-28 demonstrated. Peter places the shepherd positionally ἐν ὑμῖν, among the believers (1 Pet 5:2) rather than over the believers. Guarding and caring for (ἐπισκοποῦντες) the believers (vs. 2) contrasts with forbidden authoritarian behavior (κατακυριεύοντες) (vs. 3). Coercive methods (ἀναγκαστῶς) are replaced by the freedom that is implied in the willing attitude (ἑκουσίος) and the eager (προθύμως) heart unsullied by desire for personal gain. This is followed by the phrase, κατά θεόν, by which Peter endorses this model of leading as representing God's will. The concluding note references Christian leadership as a stewardship relationship between the leader and God in which people are entrusted to the leader as κλῆρος, a possession or a responsibility over which service is rendered as a steward. It is to this stewardship that the leader is called to serve and lead by personal example (τύποι) (cf. Mt 20:28).

The approbation of the crown of victory from ἀρχιποιμενος –Chief Shepherd—may be conceptually linked to the Good Shepherd of John 10 who though "over" the sheep chooses to serve the welfare of the sheep even to the point of death. The stress created by the irony of having a leader who is over those led but who eschews the authoritarianism associated with the superior position remains a mental model challenge and is hard to reconcile because of our close

association of "over" and "dominance." Yet it serves as an illustration of the model presented in verses 2 and 3. The Good Shepherd loves the sheep to the extent that he will die for them. This the degree to which God is calling leaders to serve his heritage and it is to this degree that he contrasts the selfish use of people for gain and the transformational serving of people who the leader is committed to building up.

In moving from a command and control structure of rulership to the model of Godly service it must be kept in mind that it is not a move toward undisciplined behavior nor is it a move into unstructured community. Recognition of social structures that reinforce order is an essential aspect of self-discipline that leads to healthy community. The intent of ὑποταγητε is that becoming a subject to another is a matter of choice made in the context of personal freedom. The one putting on the "slave's apron" (την ταπεινοφροσυνην ἐγκομβωσασθε) does so by choice not compulsion. The Chief Shepherd leads lovingly and the follower serves respectfully in order to honor the one placed in authority and to demonstrate solidarity with the freely associated community of faith that remains connected by of the bonds of love.

The counsel to humble oneself is to the leader an inoculation against the natural propensity to migrate toward authoritarian behavior. To the "younger" or subordinate leader the garment of humility enables a discipline of self that inoculates against disrespect of duly appointed authority and self-ascendant behavior that can lead to discord and rebellion. The aggregate outcome is unity and oneness akin to what we observe in the interactions of the Godhead.

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[i] This interpretation has also been supported by recent commentators such as John Skinner, Gerhard von Rad, Walther Zimmerli, etc. See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Bible Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 27.

[ii] See *Miqraot Gdolot*, ad loc.

[iii] Among more recent interpreters who advocated this view, see Clines, "Image of God in Man," 68–69; and G. F. Hasel, "The Meaning of 'Let Us' in Gen. 1:26," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 13 (1975): 65–66.