

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Leadership in the Kingdom of God

by Dan Trygg

“...the disciples said, ‘Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’² And He called a child to Himself and set him before them,³ and said, ‘Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.’⁴ Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 18:1-4

“And He said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called “Benefactors.”’²⁶ But not so with you, but let him who is the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the servant.²⁷ For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves.” Luke 22:25-27

“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself;⁴ do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.⁵ Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,⁶ who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be held on to,⁷ but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave...” Philippians 2:3-7

All four gospels record that Jesus taught a radically different view of leadership and authority in the kingdom of God, than what was prevalent in the world around them. This is an understanding that the disciples had a hard time grasping, and it has been difficult to keep Jesus’ “kingdom perspective” on leadership and authority throughout most of church history. The world’s understanding of power and authority have continually infiltrated the understanding and practice of leadership in the body of Christ. Some of the darkest episodes in church history have come about when church leaders tried to embrace, teach and employ the mindset, expectations and practices of worldly power.

As Jesus pointed out, **there is to be a distinction between the way worldly rulers operate, and the way His disciples are to operate.** We must remember that **there are two very different kingdoms at work on this planet:** (1.) **There is the kingdom of this present, evil age,** a domain of darkness, presided over by the god of this world system, Satan (Gal. 1:4; Col. 1:13; Eph. 2:2; 2 Cor. 4:4; Rev. 12:9); **and (2.) There is the kingdom of God,** a kingdom of light, which has been inaugurated in a new way through Jesus’ coming, death, resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the followers of Jesus (Mar. 1:15; Lk. 4:43; 10:9; 11:20; Jn. 18:36; Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:20; Col. 1:13; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 12:10). **The kingdom of God is set against the renegade kingdom of darkness,** and we, the church, are to come against the very gates of hades, the places where the enemy has been dug in, entrenched and fortified. **The kingdom of God is definitely on the move, breaking down the enemy’s power, exposing his lies, liberating people held in bondage,** and bringing hope, life and freedom through the victory of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. **In the end, the kingdom of God will totally defeat and displace the kingdom of this present evil age,** and God will create a new heaven and new earth untainted by evil.

As the disciples came to understand that Jesus was the promised Messiah, a king, the prophesied son of David, **it was natural to assume that His kingdom would operate like the kingdoms they knew about** in their first-century world. **In reality, however, the kingdom of God was to operate in a very different fashion.**

At times, they argued which of them would be the greatest. Jesus confronted them about this, **saying that the one who wished to be first will be last of all and servant of all.** Taking a child in His arms, He said that whoever welcomes a child in His name is receiving Him. Children were considered very unimportant in those times, certainly not worthy to disturb the “great ones” of the world, but Jesus put such a child front and center (Mk. 9:33-37). In Matthew’s version, Jesus even said that **they needed to become like a child to enter His kingdom, and humble themselves like children to become great** (Matt. 18:4).

Not long after this incident, the brothers, James and John, even tried to lobby for positions of authority in Jesus’ kingdom (Matt. 20:20-28). **Jesus explicitly said that His kingdom would be different than how the rulers of the world operate.** “You know that the rulers of the nations lord-it-down-upon them and their great ones exercise-authority-down-upon them, but *it will not be this way among you.* **Rather, whoever wishes to become great among you will be your servant, and whoever desires to become first will be your slave;** even as the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Just from these two episodes, we learn a great deal about how leadership and authority in the kingdom of God is meant to work, and how it is so much different that the systems of worldly authority. **In the system of the world, ...this present evil age..., authority is often positional and hierarchical.** “Greatness” is ascribed to those who are directing and commanding others. Often this is reinforced by control, dominance and fear of punishment. Those in

power become “more important” in their minds, and demand allegiance and obedience. They “lord-it-down-upon” others and “exercise-authority-down-upon” them. **By contrast, those who are “great” in the kingdom of Jesus remain humble and accessible, ...having interest, concern, and time for even *the least* of people.** They are not there to demand respect or to boss others around. They are there to serve others. **Respect in the kingdom of Jesus is *won* through service. Leadership is *inspired* by humble example.**

Did they get it? Did they understand what Jesus was talking about? Apparently not, because even at the last supper they were arguing about it! *Even after* Jesus Himself put aside His own garments, and wrapped Himself in a towel and performed the most lowly of services for them, ...He washed their feet. *Even after* He did *this*, and *explained* what He had done, and how He as their Lord and Teacher had given them an example to do as He did (Jn. 13:1-17). *Even after all this*, they still somehow got into a dispute as to which of them was the greatest. *Again!* **Jesus pointed out, once again, that the kings of the nations lord it over them, and they exercise authority over them, and *they like to be called “benefactors” or receive an honorific title.* He said, “You are *not* to be like this.** Rather, the one who is greater among you become like the younger (the least honored), and the one guiding be as the servant” (Lk. 22:24-26). Then, He pointed to His own example, again, “I am among you as one who serves.”

From the little glimpse we receive from Ephesians 6:12, it would seem that Satan’s kingdom is highly organized and structured in a hierarchical manner. There are “rulers”, then “authorities”, followed by “world powers of darkness”, and then “spiritual evils in the heavenlies”. **We can look back in history and see that, as a result of sin, people began to dominate and control other people,** demanding obedience and payment in the form of tribute or taxes. There were local chieftains, leaders of city states, lords, governors, kings and emperors, ...all positions of power in a hierarchical model.

If what Jesus said is true, ...namely, that leadership in His kingdom would be different than leadership in the evil world system..., we would expect a definite *differentiation in the leadership terms being used, and the way leadership is described* and worked out in practice. That is *exactly* what is found, if you do a careful search and study. (1.) The two most common words for authority in the NT that are applied to worldly political rulers (*archōn*-rulers, and *exousia*-authorities) are *never used to describe leadership positions, or interactions between Christians* within the church. (2.) While the noun form of other leadership words is preferred to describe leaders in the world, *there seems to be a conscious rejection of the noun form in favor of a verbal form, when describing leadership functions in the church.* This is amazingly consistent. This seems to reflect a conception of leadership within the church as *not* resting in offices or positions, but in *function* and *activity*. If someone is *doing leadership*, and people are following, *then he or she is a leader.* (3.) **The consistent use of the verbal forms forces us to look more closely at the functional translations of the words, instead of just translating them as “leaders”. What we discover is that there are “the ones-thinking-and-planning” (Lk. 22:26; Act 15:22; Heb. 13:7,17,24) and “the ones-standing-before” (Rom. 12:8; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:4,5,12; Tit. 3:8,14), but they are often translated simply as “leaders”, without differentiating their functions. Elders are defined functionally as ones “shepherding” and “watching over” the flock of God (Act 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-5). They are there to protect and serve the sheep, not boss them. Understanding these functions more clearly removes misunderstandings regarding their place in the body of Christ, as well as what our voluntary response should be. (4.) **What we find is that there is *no* relationship of absolute, unquestioning obedience to any human being** by virtue of their position of leadership in the church. We are responsible to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, as He works through people. God has *not* given any human being the power of mind control, or a divine right to demand your obedience by virtue of their position. (5.) **The kingdom of God does *not* operate by dominance or command, but by prayerful explanation, trust and voluntary cooperation.** God does not desire that we mindlessly obey. He desires that we thoughtfully, consciously consider and make a free choice. (6.) **Effective leadership in the body of Christ will come through relationship, example, communication and a track-record of good fruit.** While many leadership relationships in the world often operate based upon power and threat, in the kingdom of God **effective leaders will win the right to be heard through relationship or example, and others will follow because *they see evidence of God’s working in the life of that person.*****

After Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, He asked, “Do you know what I have done to you? ...I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you *know* these things, you are blessed if you *do* them” (Jn. 13:12-17). **Jesus did not just lead us by “Do as I say.” He led us by His example, “Do as I do.”** The heart of Spirit-led leadership will look like Jesus. It will not have to vie for power, or demand obedience. **The Spirit-led leader will inspire by integrity and example.** Jesus’ example involved being willing to put aside power, privilege, position and recognition in order to simply do the needed service. As we are like Him, ...as we are humble, open to listen, caring and attentive to others, and willing to give of ourselves..., people will be drawn to what they see of Jesus in us. **The world will demand obedience; Christ will offer to us the life-transforming adventure of obedience. We decide.**