A Fresh Look at Pride: The King versus the Cross

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Pride may be operationally defined as the first of the seven deadly sins; it also is the first and most fundamental temptation of man. Pride attempts to convince people that they should ascend to a throne of their own making. In the Chinese culture the value of gaining and preserving face makes pride very alluring as people strive for significance. This paper explores pride’s seductive pursuit of kingly rule and its impact upon Christian leaders and those who follow them within the context of Chinese culture. The Prophet Samuel quantifies these dangers in his description of a king’s expectations and behaviors, which parallel many of those attached with the leader concerned with gaining, saving, and losing face. This description is compared with Saint Augustine’s reflections on pride and the inner drive to rule and impress others as his central motivation to sin. Immediately following, Christ’s descriptive challenge of the requirements for all who desire to follow him provide a painful but complete solution to the problem of pride within the heart of every leader who claims to love and follow Christ.
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Since the fall of man, pride has continued to be among the most relentless temptations and the most destructive forces that mankind encounters (Reno, 2006). Leaders have historically been particularly vulnerable to pride. They are surrounded by power and risk, forced process success and failure while followers, traitors, and competitors vie for their attention. As even the most conscientious leader attempts to navigate the challenges of leadership, pride may subtly seep into quiet, unconscious corners of the mind and wreak havoc before it is even detected.

Within the Chinese culture, the expression and formation of pride to takes on unique characteristics. Among the Chinese, pride often has a face. In a Confucius-influenced, collective society that is defined by high power distance and high conflict avoidance (Dong and Lee, 2007), the concept of face is woven into the fabric of every level of Chinese society. It is an ever-present entity within the consciousness of every Chinese leader and follower. Yutang (1935) described face as “the most curious point of Chinese social psychology. Abstract and intangible, it is yet the most delicate standard by which Chinese social intercourse is regulated (pp. 199-200). Carr (1992, 1993) found more than 90 terms for concepts surrounding face, including gaining face, losing face, padding face, fighting for face, and destroying face, which are illustrative of the deeply-embedded drive for leaders to gain and protect their face. This dynamic makes pride a particular challenge to address.

In this paper, Pride’s origins, power, and expression are explored by examining a biblical prophet’s warning and a historic theft of pears. The paper applies the findings to the culturally specific challenges that face Chinese Christian leaders, describing how leaders can confront and overcome pride within themselves and attempt to diffuse it among colleagues and followers. A
challenge from Jesus then uncovers an antidote to pride and presents a daunting mandate that Christian leaders and followers alike must face if they are willing to look and listen closely.

**King Pride**

*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* defines pride as “the first of the seven deadly sins, being the inordinate love of one's own excellence” (Livingstone, 2006). This is a challenging description, because pride can slip in from many directions, disguising itself as innocent pleasure or a celebration of responsibility. A love of one’s own excellence is almost an imperative if one of status is to properly steward one’s *face*. Ho (1974) describes *timian* as "an expression without an exact equivalent in English", meaning "the social front, the ostensible display of one's social standing to the public. It is both a prerogative and an implicit obligation for the socially prominent to be particular about" (p.241). Where does honor end and pride begin? Dong and Lee (2007) stated:

*Face* is hierarchical for Chinese. Great importance is placed on status and ranks, which means an individual’s amount of *face* relies largely on the social position s/he holds. The higher the rank is, the more *face* the individual possesses, and the more likely s/he will be given *face* (p.405).

One can love to be excellent, to do excellent things, to lead or judge or plan or perform with excellence - but gradually, without realizing it, one can become overly impressed with personal character, performance, or connections. Slowly, self-perception can begin to transform. One can start to view the power, position, and successes of our leadership as one’s *own doing*. From Dong and Lee’s (2007) description of the development and reinforcement of *face* it not difficult to comprehend how the pursuit of *face* can reinforce power distance and isolation for leaders. It can begin to cause a leader to view followers as tools to build *face*, and other leaders
or high achievers as threats to losing face. In short, leaders can begin to act like kings, proud of their kingdoms and leery of threats to the crown. The words of the prophet Samuel describe the attitude, the role, and the behavior of a king in I Samuel 8:

So Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking for a king from him. He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves” (vv. 10-16 ESV).

These verses are very likely restating an older document that delineated the privileges and rights of a king, as would be consistent with the Near Eastern practices at the time (Coogan, 2001), and they were specifically meant to be accurate for a king’s behavior in Israel in 1020–1000 BC (Gunn, 2001), however the warning in this description can apply in principle to leaders today who exhibit these behaviors.

A king will reign over the people.

The word used for reign in Hebrew was malak, which means “to ascend the throne, to [be] set up as king, to rule surely” (Strong, 1996). A king is treated as superior in every way to all others, and consequently he ought not to be challenged. As one who is superior to and more powerful than everyone else, king makes decisions that cannot be questioned.
A king will take the best of all the followers have, and use them as tools for his own plans.

The king took people’s sons – those who would have been depended upon to take on the family businesses and responsibilities (Coogan, 2001) – and used them instead to simply make his journey smooth and fully announced. He took the people’s daughters – who were depended upon within the families to help with feeding the households and beautifying the homes (Coogan, 2001) - and used them to feed and beautify his own operations. He took the best of everything everyone had for his own empire and left everyone else the leftovers - and everyone in the kingdom was considered his slave. He compromised families at the nuclear level to satisfy his own desires. Quality of life for everyone but the king and the king’s personal conquests would diminish, and they would be at the king’s mercy. God did not want this for his people, but the people wanted a king “like all the nations” (1 Samuel 8:20 ESV). They exchanged God’s personal rule over them for the broken system that everyone else had. And the broken system produced a broken man who developed an “inordinate love for [his] own excellence” that eventually destroyed both him and his line (1 Samuel 19).

King of the Hill.

Today, it is still tempting to succumb to the king’s mindset. Power is a very alluring seductress, and in the short-run, reigning over others and using them for one’s own devices can be very gratifying. The concept of gaining and protecting face can potentially facilitate the cultivation of pride. Hu (1944) described mianzi, a quantifiable form of face in this way:

[face] can be borrowed, struggled for, added to, padded, — all terms indicating a gradual increase in volume. It is built up through initial high position, wealth, power, ability, through cleverly establishing social ties to a number of prominent people, as well as through avoidance of acts that would cause unfavorable comment. (p.61)
Who would not desire to be acknowledged above everyone else in the room as the smartest, the most gifted, the “best person for the job,” to have the best of everything and everyone in the realm attending to personal desires? Whose flesh would not enjoy the novelty of always being right? Many dream of being in a position in which they would never be questioned, and crave a chance to be viewed as the savior and judge of the organization. Unfortunately, a king’s mindset comes at a price. As was evident in the life of Saul in I Samuel 13, with such unquestioned power and position, pride deceives leaders into thinking they can bypass God’s will and make a way of their own. Saul disobeyed God and attempted to please Him on his own terms. He justified his actions instead of repenting. Before long, Saul was making rash vows and threats against anyone who questioned him (1 Samuel 14), and when God rejected him for his rebellion, Saul grew jealous and murderously paranoid of the man who would eventually replace him (1 Samuel 18).

Particularly in churches, many leaders have attempted to use Old Testament kings as their model for spiritual leadership. On numerous occasions, the author has witnessed senior pastors describe themselves as King David, and then describe the young up-and-coming associate pastor on staff with them as Absalom who is attempting to overtake the throne; however the author has also listened to staff pastors share in tears that they feel like King David after he was anointed king but before he was given the throne, and they are convinced that they are being pursued by a paranoid and ruthless Saul. Everyone wanted to view himself or herself as King David; the perception of other characters depended upon “David’s” current position. Unfortunately, the summative problem with all of these ministers’ identification with King David is that churches do not have kings. They have shepherds (1 Peter 5:1-4). Somehow these leaders had forgotten who they were called to be, what the pastorate was meant to be, and the value of the people they
were serving. They had ascended to thrones – or were protecting thrones – or aspiring to thrones in their own eyes. Thrones of ministry are just as alluring for some as thrones of successful business or thrones of fame, wealth, honor and popularity are for others. An inordinate love for one’s own excellence can lead to blindness of one’s first love, and all that remains is a ruthless game of King of the Hill.

**Of Pride and Pears.**

Pride’s unsearchable capacity to tempt mankind is not limited to those with social rank. It lies deeply embedded within the heart of every person from the highest economic tycoon to the lowliest cardboard sign-wielding panhandler. In a sense, carnal nature hungers for the gratification of pride above all other hungers. Saint Augustine described his discovery of this hunger when as a teenager he stole some pears while in the company of other boys. Augustine admitted that he was concerned with how these other boys perceived him (Boulding, 1997). Reno (2006) proposed, “In the main, Augustine’s genealogy of immorality describes an interior moment of rebellion that is not so much a discrete act as it is a primal moment of self-definition” (p. 171). Perhaps the East is not as far removed from the West as is often perceived; by all appearances Augustine was attempting to build face. Admittedly, Augustine would never have stolen the pears if he had been alone. He was not hungry for the pears, but instead longed for the blissful power derived from being perceived by others as powerful, by choosing to do something that he knew was forbidden:

“What did I love in you, O my theft…? There was nothing beautiful about you, for you were nothing but a theft…. Those pears were beautiful, but they were not what my miserable soul loved…. I feasted on the sin, nothing else, and that I relished and enjoyed it. For in vice there lurks a counterfeit beauty… even pride apes sublimity, whereas you
are the only God, most high above all things…All those who wander far away and set themselves up against you are imitating you, but in a perverse way; yet by this very mimicry they proclaim that you are the creator of the whole of nature, and that in consequence there is no place whatever that we can hide from your presence” (St. Augustine, II:12-14; Boulding 1997).

When the veils of pride are pulled back, it becomes obvious that pride is the original form of idolatry (Reno, 2006). As Augustine describes, pride drives its bearers to attempt to imitate God – to attempt to be “like our perverted image of God as omnipotent beings at liberty to do whatever we want. This, then, is the deep structure of sin:…We draw to ourselves the attribute of omnipotence, hoping to possess it as our own” (Reno, 2006, p. 172). Herein lies the fallacy of “gaining and preserving face:” When people attempt in pride to ascend to any throne, whether it is in a church or a business, or simply in the realm of controlling their own face, they will fail miserably at being kings “for we have nothing to give ourselves other than our reality as creatures whose true happiness is in God alone, which is exactly the opposite of that which pride seeks….pride will fail, and in failing, it becomes not its opposite, which is humility, but instead the perversion of a perversion, the redoubled futility of slavery to idols of our own fabrication” (Reno, 2006, p. 173). When self-love moves beyond accepting people’s divinely gifted value as children of God, it can easily morph into an inordinate love for personal excellence, and drive people to become kings of their own crumbling kingdoms.

The Face of a King

Honor and dignity are beautiful when they reflect the genuine character of a leader. But pride has taken the leader’s heart captive, the moment that the leader’s highest priority is to build and maintain face above the pursuit of character (2 Chronicles 26:16; Psalm 10:4). The prophet
Samuel was impressed with the “faces” of David’s older brothers, in the sense that he was impressed with their “prestige; dignity; honor; respect; status” (Carr, 1993, p. 90). These were impressive men who carried themselves with kingly distinction.

“but the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7 ESV).

However, being selected by God to lead does not immune one from an “inordinate love of one’s own excellence.” David, the man God had chosen to lead Israel, allowed himself to become ensnared by pride for a season. Instead of shepherding the people, he isolated himself and afforded himself special privileges on the basis of his position (2 Samuel 11:1-3). In this state of mind, he sent for another man’s wife and committed adultery with her (2 Samuel 11:4). The woman became pregnant, and to save face, David attempted to trick her husband into being intimate with her (2 Samuel 11:6-13). When unsuccessful, David had the woman’s husband killed so that he could marry the woman himself to further protect the public perception of his image (2 Samuel 11:14-27). Hu (1944) would have described the kind of concern for face that David exhibited as yao mianzi 要面子 "eager[ness] to gain reputation; [an exhibition of] concern about appearances" (p. 58). However, the prophet Nathan confronted David with what his true concern should have been:

Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. And I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? … Thus says the LORD, 'Behold, I will raise up
evil against you out of your own house. … For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun." David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." And Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child who is born to you shall die" (2 Samuel 12:7-14 ESV).

Even in the life of the man that God had chosen to lead Israel, pride was able to take a foothold. Face had become more important than heart; reputation and rank took precedence over character. The cycle was not broken until David was willing to “lose face” by publicly repenting of his sin before all of Israel (Psalm 51), and even then the ripple effect of his compromise still permanently impacted his family (2 Samuel 12:11-14).

**Long Live the King?**

Regardless of the position one holds, mental ascension to a throne of superiority and distinction is not a mark of honor; it is pride, whether the superiority is in one’s own eyes alone or in the eyes of all that follow (Proverbs 29:23; Isaiah 2:11; Jeremiah 48:29). An inordinate love of one’s own excellence breeds a hunger for the rush of power derived from grasping for knowledge and power beyond human means to contain. How does such pride impact the followers if one is attempting to lead in this condition? The king’s covenant with the people as described by Samuel varies greatly from the shepherd’s covenant, as described by Jesus. The good shepherd lays his life down for the sheep. The sheep know the shepherd’s voice, and follow the shepherd because of the love and trust relationship they have established. Their needs are met by the shepherd, who lives to protect and serve the sheep (John 10). In contrast, when leaders are in pursuit of a perverted sense or perception of omniscience and omnipotence, they promise to take the best of everyone and everything, in exchange for a public display of knowledge and
power: judgment and protection (from outside threats). If leaders love their followers they will use their power and knowledge to promote and protect the followers. If leaders love self they will use followers to promote and protect their face and to build their monopoly of power and knowledge. Leaders who love themselves have no intention of creating threats by empowering, liberating, or building up those who follow them.

The followers in either social contract must process and respond to the covenant they make with the type of leader they select. If they choose to follow a king, the people will need to find a way to make sense of the fact that all the best of their energy, treasure, and relationships are being siphoned off for the leader. The masses may buy into the king’s role and dedicate themselves to the promotion of everything the king desires, in exchange for the king’s agreement to fight their battles (e.g. plan or dominate their lives, make their difficult decisions, defend their mistakes). These people’s spiritual, emotional, and psychological growth will be stunted by this relationship, because they have abdicated their right to think for themselves. Some will eventually question the role of the king and either challenge the king directly, or attempt to leave. Either of these scenarios will likely trigger “the taking up of arms” on the part of the king – and as 1 Samuel 8 warned, the king has amassed an army for just such occasions. Fear of challenging the king permeates the people living under his rule, especially in circles that warn questioners with, “Touch not the Lord’s anointed,” a loose quotation of David based upon I Samuel 24:6, when David ordered no one to harm Saul despite his evil behaviors, because God had anointed Saul king. The author has observed the common misuse of this passage frighten people into believing that they could be cursed if they confront the “anointed king.” So much pain, fear, and betrayal has wracked local church congregations, governments, and other organizations around the world and throughout the centuries, because the leaders attempted to take for themselves the
omnipotence and omniscience that belongs to God alone (Malachi 2; Acts 12; 1 Corinthians 3). Once pride begins to delude the mind of the leader, only one thing can overcome it: Death.

**The Power of the Cross, Beyond Forgiveness**

Christians embrace the cross as central to the gospel, but what is the significance of the cross in relation to pride, beyond God’s promise of forgiveness of it upon acceptance of Christ’s sacrifice? This question prompts an examination of the cross in the following passages with different eyes – not the eyes of a contemporary Christian, but the eyes of a Jew who was living in Palestine during the rule of Rome at the time of Christ. Rome used crucifixion as a normal method of executing low criminals (Betz, 1993). A Palestinian Jew during this period would be accustomed to seeing people on hill-tops and road-sides being crucified, accustomed to watching condemned men dragging their cross-beams through winding streets of busy cities, following behind a Roman soldier who held their ever-waning life in his hands (Betz, 1993). It would be commonplace to walk by corpses of crucified people hanging on crosses outside cities and towns. The cross was a familiar object to the people of Jesus’ day, but not because Jesus was so frequently discussing it. Before he ever foretold the nature of his death, and certainly before he died, Jesus had challenged his followers to take up their cross and follow him:

“And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:38 ESV).

“And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34 ESV).

“And he said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23 ESV)
If one reads these passages through the lens of contemporary retrospection, one could unconsciously assume that the disciples knew then what contemporary believers know today: That Jesus himself would die on a cross. But they could not have known. Jesus had not announced that he would die on a cross, so it does not make sense to believe that Jesus was saying, “You should be willing to die on a cross, just like me.” Without the knowledge of future events, there was no way for Christ’s disciples to draw such a parallel. So what was Jesus saying? What image would the disciples have conjured when Jesus said that they had to take up their cross and follow him if they wanted to be worthy to be his disciples?

Living in first century Palestine, the disciples had no shortage of “cross-bearing condemned man following a soldier” imagery in their minds to draw from. It is even possible that Jesus and his disciples may have witnessed such a scene together, and that it was such a scene that triggered his thoughts and motivated him to challenge them with, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

*When carrying a cross, there is no mistaking who is in charge.*

This challenge radically redefined for followers what it meant to them if they chose to follow Jesus. Christ’s vivid imagery is unmistakable: one man is leading with all power and authority over another man who is following, completely as his mercy. The follower has absolutely no power or authority over his own life any longer. The leader is in absolute control of the follower, from the moment he picks up his cross until the moment he dies upon it. Christ paints a picture of one person in all-consuming control over the life and death (and every step in between) of another.

If a Jew in Palestine at the time of Christ had heard Jesus utter these words the message would have been clear: to be the disciple of Jesus, you must be the one carrying the cross and following close behind your leader. Jesus alone must be the one in front, making every decision,
in absolute control of all that happens to his follower – including identity, friends, family, career, time, finances, dreams, and ultimately destiny. A Jew who was alive during the time of Christ would have left the conversation without a doubt that following Jesus meant complete submission to his full authority. Beyond the cross of Jesus that leads to forgiveness, there is a cross for all who will follow him to bear: the cross of abandonment to his will alone, the cross of obedience to Jesus, absent personal rights.

*Only room for one King*

Regardless of previous status, power, reputation, or position, the person carrying a cross-beam through the streets has little time or appreciation for such matters. No further concern about the consequences of losing face exists. The only person in the world now of any consequence to the condemned is the one who leads the procession. No longer is there any discussion about rights. Any false hopes of glory, fame, wealth, honor, prestige, or popularity vanished the moment the cross-beam was taken up. Love for personal excellence seems so far removed from the present reality that it cannot fully be grasped any longer. This person is a “dead man walking.” This person has surrendered fully to the leader.

This concept of taking up one’s cross is foreign and even offensive to the “Jesus is here to give me my best life now” mentality that permeates contemporary Western culture, but Jesus is not requiring anything of others that he did not require of himself. Although he was in the form and nature of God, Jesus never allowed himself the delicious rush of experiencing a conscious choice to exercise his will divorced from God’s. His avoidance of pride was by default an avoidance of idolatry, paranoia, greed, and lust. Examine for a moment at how Jesus, who legitimately was the King (Luke 23:3; John 18:33), viewed his rights to exercise his kingship.

*He forfeited his right to initiate his own actions.*
“I can do nothing on my own,” he said. “As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 5:30 ESV).

*He forfeited his right to perpetuate his own plans.*

“For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38 ESV).

*He forfeited his own authority over others.*

“…I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me” (John 8:28 ESV).

*He forfeited his own life.*

“And he said, ‘Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36 ESV).

“…saying, ‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42 ESV).

Jesus is the only person who has ever lived who legitimately had plenty of reason for pride. Yet despite this, he took no short-cuts. He still had to make a conscious decision to lay aside his rights, to fully submit to his Father. Jesus never attempted to negotiate his terms of service to God, or ask God to bless what he alone desired to do. He refused to live in any way contrary to God’s will. He was fully aware of his utter dependence upon his Father to think, speak, and act perfectly. How does the heart of Christ square with our hunger for and justification of pride? The Apostle Paul challenged us with the answer:

“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in
appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:5-8 ESV).

Pride, the original form of idolatry, is a powerful enemy to becoming a true disciple of Christ. Pride can drive people to be more concerned with promoting appearance than preserving relationship, more devoted to reputation than to character, all for the sake of preserving the face of a king. If pride is allowed to perform its work, it will ultimately cause those who entertain it to think and behave as kings, and view others as either tools or threats to their face. In an attempt to rise to the heights of power and knowledge, the kingdoms of prestige and power will crumble beneath their builders. Christ leaves no room for pride in the lives of his followers. He calls all who claim him to take up their cross in true humility and transparency and follow Jesus, all the way to the end. As the devout Quaker minister, Thomas Kelly described, “Self is emptied into God, and God in-fills it. In glad, amazed humility we cast on Him our little lives in trusting obedience” (Foster & Griffin, 2000, p. 178). The leader willing to take up the cross and follow Jesus, can finally see his or her life not according to the human estimations of successes or external goodness, not according to the public view of his or her personal excellence, but according to understanding of and love for God. “….nothing else in all of heaven or earth counts so much as His will, His slightest wish, His faintest breathing. And holy obedience sets in, sensitive as a shadow, obedient as a shadow, selfless as a shadow...” (Foster & Griffin, 2000, p. 178). May the only king of any Christian leader be the Lord. May every follower of Christ lay the right to control face and all other rights aside, take up their cross-beam, and follow Christ to the end. Jesus promises, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16:25 ESV). Honor, prestige, dignity, and respect are illusions and facades if divorced from a sacrificial heart of love for Christ. One could toil a lifetime to
gain, protect, and save face, only to lose it in the end at the sight of one’s Maker – but “those who look to [the LORD] are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed” (Psalm 34:5 ESV).
References


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