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THE SERVING ORGANIZATION: JESUS VS. HIERARCHY IN MATTHEW 20:20-28

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There seems to be a fundamental belief among many authors in the extant literature that Jesus' teachings support an organizational structure that depends upon an elite few individuals with a high concentration of power constructing subordinate positions of power through which they accomplish their intended outcomes. In contrast, other authors have associated Jesus' teachings with flatter, more organic organizations. This article presents an analysis of hierarchy as an organizational design in terms of Jesus' response to attempts on the part of the Zebedee family to stratify the disciples in terms of leadership roles in Matthew 20:20-28. Using social and cultural textures of socio-rhetorical criticism, this periscope is analyzed for evidence of a reformist and/or utopian response to hierarchical organizational designs in contrast to nonhierarchical designs. Further research is proposed based on this framework as to the kind of organizational design is most conducive for supporting a collection of authentic servant leaders.

I. THE SERVING ORGANIZATION: JESUS VS. HIERARCHY MATTHEW 20:20-28

There seems to be a fundamental belief among many authors in the extant literature that Jesus' teachings support an organizational structure that depends upon an elite few individuals with a high concentration of power constructing subordinate positions of power through which they accomplish their intended outcomes¹. In contrast, other authors have associated Jesus' teachings with flatter, more organic

¹ Mark J. Martinko and William L. Gardner, "Learned Helplessness: An Alternative Explanation for Performance Deficits," *Academy of Management Review* 7, no. 2 (1982): 195-204.

organizations². Is hierarchy a divine design, or does it represent an anthropological Tower of Babel stemming from sinful human attitudes and ambition to power? The purpose of this article is to present an analysis of hierarchy as an organizational design in terms of Jesus' response to the Zebedee family to stratify the disciples in terms of leadership roles in Matthew 20:20-28. If Jesus is divine, then His approach to organizational design represents more than a single methodology among a plurality of ideas, but rather an ideal form that is untainted by humanity's flawed nature³.

The foundation for this analysis is socio-rhetorical criticism, specifically in the form of social and cultural texture⁴. This method examines the voices of a particular pericope of scriptural text in terms of sociological and cultural theory.⁵ This includes an investigation of the political backdrop for the dialog between Jesus and the Zebedees, common organizational design of religious institutions of the day, and norms passed on through the family to children in the cultural context and timeframe.

Reformist argumentation provides a useful paradigm given the presupposition that institutions and organizations can facilitate good and curtail tyranny.⁶ This viewpoint could prove effective in identifying practical applications of organizational design that could be useful in contemporary organizations, whether faith-based or noncumenical. The intent of this writing is not to disparage the use of hierarchical forms of governance, but rather to illuminate that hierarchy is not necessarily the *a priori* blueprint for organizational success.

II. SOCIAL–CULTURAL TEXTURE: CAESAR, THE HIGH PRIEST, AND AN AMBITIOUS MOM

Jesus' ministry came at a time when frustration with Roman occupation of Israel was high and there was great anticipation for a political and eschatological Messiah that would cast off the bonds of this foreign empire.⁷ The Roman authorities designated Judea as an imperial territory rather than a senatorial as it was considered difficult to rule and unlikely to fully assimilate into the Roman archetype.⁸ In contrast to the expectations of the Israeli people, Jesus demonstrated that His purpose was not to cast off the Roman occupation and establish a kingdom to rule, but rather demonstrate and acculturate His followers in the art of service to one another.⁹ While the Roman population had an aversion to monarchy rule, as Caligula discovered, there was a firmly

² Terence L. Nichols, "Hierarchy and the Church," *Pro Ecclesia* 4, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 282.

³ George F. Tittman, "How Can We Say that Jesus was Perfect?: A Note for the Modern Apologist," *Anglican Theological Review* 36, no. 3 (1954): 201-204.

⁴ Vernon K. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society, and Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁷ Ndubuisi B. Akuchie, "The Servants and the Superstars: An Examination of Servant Leadership in Light of Matthew 20:20-28," *Christian Education Journal* 14, no. 1 (1993): 39.

⁸ David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 58-59.

⁹ Chana Safrai, "The Mother of the Zebedee Brothers (Matthew 20:20-28)," *Beginnings for Christianity* (2005): 131.

established bureaucratic hierarchy of authority.¹⁰ Power flowed down from Caesar to the senatorial administration for assimilated provinces, and further to prefects from the equestrian class who answered to imperial legate representatives from the senatorial class.¹¹

Even though Herod and his descendants maintained political control of Judea at the beginning of the Christian era, there was a strong effort on the part of Judeans for the Romans to endorse the internal rule of the temple hierocracy under the high priest.¹² This suggests that culturally this structure had a strong influence on governance so long as it did not interfere with the external political authority of Rome by way of appointed prefects. Therefore, organizational structures modeled by Rome and the Levitical priesthood both appear to be hierarchical even if they stopped short of monarchy. In the dialog presented in Matthew 20:20-28, Jesus offered a leadership model devoid of positional authority, prestige, and ambition to power that was inconsistent with both temple tradition and Roman imperialism. As Akuchie described it, "the only way to an upward mobility [in Christ's kingdom] is a downward mobility."¹³

It is difficult to fault the Zebedee mom for her attempt to promote the advancement of her sons in light of the cultural understanding of hierarchical leadership structures. Cheney, for instance, inferred that part of the traditional role for a mother in ancient Hebrew culture was to promote the interests and success of her male offspring.¹⁴ Whether her frame of reference was Rome or whether it was the temple hierocracy, "no one is immune against the temptation to power and stardom."¹⁵

Reformist and Utopian Framework

Robbins discussed seven responses to the world that can act as a framework for analyzing Biblical texts, highlighting that more than one may be relevant within any given passage.¹⁶ The seven responses are: (1) conversionist, (2) revolutionist, (3) introversionist, (4) Gnostic manipulationist, (5) thaumaturgic, (6) reformist, and (7) utopian. The discourse between Jesus and the disciples in Matthew 20:25-28 seems to align most with the two latter responses. Jesus said to the disciples:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.¹⁷

The reformist response seems an appropriate fit since Jesus is not commanding the disciples to abandon the world, rather identifying that monarchs are often prone to

¹⁰ deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament*.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 65.

¹³ Akuchie, "The Servants and the Superstars," 41.

¹⁴ Emily Cheney, "The Mother of the Sons of Zebedee (Matthew 27.56)," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 68 (1997): 17.

¹⁵ Akuchie, "The Servants and the Superstars," 40.

¹⁶ Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, 144.

¹⁷ NRSV.

despotic behavior and that the disciples should lead in a different manner.¹⁸ Robbins suggested that reformist argumentation “attempts to encourage people to involve themselves in the world with good deeds,” which seems consistent with Jesus charge activity in the world without succumbing to oppressive leadership tactics.¹⁹ A reasonable case could also be made that Jesus is calling for a utopian response as well. Robbins described that utopian argumentation has elements of introversionist argumentation and reformist argumentation in that it promotes partial withdrawal from the corrupted world, while still working to improve flawed human systems.²⁰ Robbins’ criteria for reformist response appear to include the following: (1) social institutions can serve a good rather than oppressive purpose, (2) identity with and study of the world are acceptable, and (3) acceptance of the world without becoming corrupted by it.²¹ Criteria for the utopian response includes: (1) the whole social system in the current world is evil, (2) “people should inaugurate a new social system free from evil and corruption,”²² and (3) the new system should completely change all relationships.²³

Jesus first identifies that human forms of governance are naturally oppressive: “the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them” (Mt 20:26). This would seem to fit with either the revisionist or utopian responses. Next, He categorically rejects such autocratic means of leadership, which is certainly consistent with the utopian response and arguably also consistent with the reformist response since He instructs the disciples not to become part of the world or made impure by it.²⁴ While Jesus proposes a different approach for His followers, He does not categorically reject human institutions of social design. In this, there seems a stronger rationalization for the reformist view rather than the utopian view since Jesus encouraged the disciples to change their own understanding of what made an effective leader, without suggesting that they completely reject engagement with society.

III. DIVINE BUREAUCRACY: AUTHORITY, OBEDIENCE, AND HIERARCHY

Jesus established a new paradigm for organizational design by providing a new model of leadership towards which the disciples could aspire, and the inferred endorsement to engage with the world. There seems a certain irony that Jesus seemed to discourage hierarchy among His followers, and yet Christian institutions often operate under a hierarchical model. For instance, John Papadopoulos contended that the Church and church hierarchy cannot be separated because Jesus imparted authority on His disciples who in turn imparted authority on subsequent ministry chiefs.²⁵ McGarry offered a summary of the historical rise of hierarchy within the Christian Church consisting of (1) Christ and the disciples did not implement an organizational structure in

¹⁸ Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, 149.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 150.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ John Papadopoulos, “On the Hierarchy of the Church,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 1, no. 2 (March 1955): 142.

expectation of the second coming; (2) early Christian communities were governed by elders chosen out of the community; (3) due to impatience in waiting for the second coming of Christ, overseers began to seize additional power; (4) the overseers grew in power by taking over “liturgical, disciplinary and doctrinal functions”; (5) a chairman of the committee of overseers was elected or seized power over the committee; (6) “the non-episcopate raised itself to a position of exclusive authority” by attaching themselves to Saint Paul; and (7) a general consensus of Christian communities emerged in support of a unified hierarchy.²⁶ In this historical account, many stages of the stages leading to the expansion of the hierarchy involve seizure or power, compulsion to concede power to a central body, and posturing for increased power. The question to consider is whether the hierarchy resembled more Jesus’ description of Gentile rulers, or rather His description of a reformed model of leadership supported by the principles of humble service.

Reformist Argumentation and Hierarchy

Nichols argued that command-style hierarchies common in both secular and religious organizations are contradictory to Jesus’ teachings as opposed to participatory organizational designs, which are more consistent with Biblical principles.²⁷ This author makes it clear that this conclusion was not derived from feminist or egalitarian assumptions that hierarchies are “*necessarily* [author emphasis] dominative, sexist and static,” but rather that autocratic hierarchies are inconsistent with Christ’s teaching about leadership. It seems reasonable, however, to suggest that some or all of these undesirable characteristics of hierarchies are a natural extension of a flawed human system implemented in place of God’s perfect design.

Koenig challenges the notion that Christ’s teachings exclusively promote nonhierarchical leadership any more so than hierarchical leadership, but rather the importance of being a servant of Christ in any context.²⁸ This author also posited that becoming a servant of Christ does not equate to a lower status, but rather involves authorization to employ great power to accomplish His purposes.²⁹ It seems that Nichols and Koenig would at very least agree that Jesus’ teachings and example do not directly promote hierarchical or authoritative organizational structures. However, Nichols seems to support the notion that hierarchies are incongruent with servanthood, while Koenig asserted “servanthood in and for Christ is the chief factor operative in all hierarchies involving believers”³⁰ Both arguably hold a reformist view in that they do not call for the outright replacement of human social organization, but rather the application within such constructs. Perhaps the point of status is the extent that servant leaders should strive to influence the structure versus accepting their role within the structure.

Regarding Matthew 20:20-28, Davidson asserted that the disciples are in a different cognitive framework than Jesus because their social and cultural conditioning

²⁶ William J. McGarry, “History and the Hierarchy,” *Theological Studies* 1, no. 3 (1940): 286.

²⁷ Nichols, “Hierarchy and the Church,” 282.

²⁸ John Koenig, “Hierarchy Transfigured: Perspectives on Leadership in the New Testament,” *Word & World* 13, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 27-28.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

favors “power, status, and prestige, where people are in competition with one another.”³¹ The author infers that Jesus forbade the use of unrestrained power on the part of one believer over another within the Church, based on the use of the Greek word *exousia*, translated “authority.”³² Davidson explained, “Exousia-authority in this instance is (1) hierarchical, (2) it comes by virtue of an office one occupies, and (3) it cannot be opposed lawfully. Authority flows down from the top in a pyramid,” and that the New Testament only ascribed such authority to Christ alone, never to positions within the Church such as elders or deacons.³³

IV. SERVING ORGANIZATION: OF THE SERVANTS, BY THE SERVANTS, AND FOR THE SERVANTS

As demonstrated in the previous sections, the milieu for the discourse in Matthew 20:20-28 is a culture of authority and hierarchy in the hands of sinful humanity that produces tyranny and despotism.³⁴ This tendency towards hierarchical structures and the pursuit of position within such strata was both taught and proliferated by the family.³⁵ However, Jesus intentionally resisted a stratified organizational design for His ministry, addressing the personal ambition of the disciples as well as the familial foundation for such ambition. It seems that Matthew may have emphasized the role that the mother of the Zebedee brothers played as illustrative that even their upbringing in this regard focused on aspiration to power rather than servant leadership.

The contemporary study of servant leadership deals with similar challenges. Robert Greenleaf identified a problem for the field of leadership:

For the individual in society and his or her bent to deal with the massive problems of our times wholly in terms of systems, ideologies, and movements, these have their place, but they are not basic because they do not make themselves. What is basic is the incremental thrust of an individual who has the ability to serve and lead.³⁶

There seems to be a close parallel to Jesus statement, “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant” (Mt 20:26). Clearly individual followers can act as a servant within a hierarchical organizational design. Perhaps a question deserving of further research is what kind of organizational design is most conducive for a collection of authentic servant leaders? The analysis of a reformist response to the world in Matthew 20:20-28 could provide a framework upon which to conduct such research.

Since the reformist framework offers that social, economic, and political institutions can serve good rather than exploitive ends, it seems reasonable to attempt a synthesis between Jesus’ vision of leaders who serve and the kind of organization that can best support such service. In the text, Jesus associated rulers with tyrants as if to

³¹ Bruce Davidson, “You Are All Brothers: Growing in our Understanding of Authority,” *Searching Together* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 30.

³² Ibid., 31.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Chana Safrai, “The Mother of the Zebedee Brothers.”

³⁵ Emily Cheney, “The Mother of the Sons of Zebedee (Matthew 27.56),” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 68 (1997): 17.

³⁶ Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant Leader Within* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 31.

suggest that this is the natural end to come from establishing an elevated status of some disciples over others.³⁷ This could lead to such follow up research questions as to whether hierarchical systems necessarily lead to power mongering and politicking, or whether the structure itself is neutral.³⁸ Further, Jesus is addressing the question in the context of cultural conditioning that encourages and promotes social climbing and ambition to an elevated status over others. This suggests an another possible follow-up research question into what preconceived notions about power and position within our social and cultural norms motivate our unconscious understanding of leadership.

Such research would perhaps inform organizational design that would recognize the value of commitment and sacrifice more so than political shrewdness. This could be particularly meaningful in light of recent concerns raised by authors such as Jon Anderson that servant leaders might sacrifice the priorities and goals of the organization.³⁹ Perhaps an intentional design for The Serving Organization might better support servant leaders in such a way that these ends are not mutually exclusive, instead of allowing them to be marginalized because their focus is not on self-promotion.

V. CONCLUSION: LIFE AS RANSOM

“Just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28). If a hierarchy functionally codifies a chain of compulsory service, then it seems reasonable to suggest that this design does not naturally encourage individuals to follow Jesus’ example to live their lives as a ransom. Lawler suggested functions of a hierarchy including: (1) motivating effective performance, usually through reward or punishment; (2) recordkeeping; (3) coordinating, usually higher levels coordinating the activities of those in lower levels; (4) assigning work, a form of compulsory service; (5) making personnel decisions such as hire, fire, pay, or promote; (6) providing expertise, inferring that those further up the hierarchy are more knowledgeable; (7) setting goals for performance; (8) planning of activities and methods; (9) linking communications horizontally and vertically; (10) training/coaching; (11) leading such that work groups are motivated towards a common vision; and (12) controlling.⁴⁰ Such functions seem more consistent with rulers who lord it over their subjects (Mt 20:25), and less consistent with giving one’s life as a ransom (Mt 20:28). Perhaps then The Serving Organization would be made up of individuals seeking to use their influence to better the circumstances of all their constituents both internally and externally.

³⁷ Akuchie, “The Servants and the Superstars,” 40.

³⁸ A. J. Grimes, “Authority, Power, Influence and Social Control: A Theoretical Synthesis,” *The Academy of Management Review* 3, no.4 (1978): 725-727.

³⁹ Jon Aarum Andersen, “When a Servant-Leader Comes Knocking,” *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 30, no. 1(2009): 13.

⁴⁰ Edward E. Lawler III, “Substitutes for Hierarchy,” *Incentive* 163, no. 3 (March 1989): 6-8.

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