For the Son of Man did not come to lead, but to be led: Matthew 20:20-28 and royal service
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“Servanthood with no rights or status is, for the Christian, the height of greatness.”

(Goldsmith, p148)

Several years ago the Christian organisation for which I worked hired a new colleague. As we got to know her, we discovered that a cousin of hers was a footman at Buckingham Palace and, therefore, worked for Queen Elizabeth. It was probably the closest degree of separation with royalty that any of us would ever have and it was the talk of the office for quite some time. Unsurprisingly, we were never party to any royal tidbits or morsels of gossip – her cousin was clearly a discrete and loyal servant of the monarch.

Reflecting, years later, on her cousin’s service as a royal footman, I now understand something of what it means to be in royal service. Let me to explain. Royal footmen are as rare as hens’ teeth. The chance of getting a job as a royal footman is probably one that many young men and women would jump at. For starters, it’s going to look great on your resumé. Secondly, it’s an amazingly privileged position to be in. It’s a job with high social status. In comparison, bankers, brain surgeons, and basketball coaches are relatively commonplace. Each of them would be lining up to swap stories and contacts with a royal footman. A royal footman could quickly come to be person of influence as a consequence of his position in royal service. But, and note this well, he or she remains a servant.

Now, the analogy is far from perfect, but it offers a potentially new way into a fifty-year old conversation about a style of leadership that is known as ‘servant leadership’. We’ll return to the analogy towards the close of this chapter. Before that, however, I’m going to take a closer look at the way that Christian authors and leaders have mined the apparently endless seam of leadership theories and practices.

CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP AND CHRIST’S LORDSHIP

It’s a widely observed fact that there are numerous theoretical perspectives relating to leadership, whether secular or specifically faith-based (see Northouse, 2009 and 2010; Yukl, 2010, for helpful summaries of the range of leadership theories in use). A cursory examination of Christian leadership literature soon unearthed an absence of any coherent theoretical grounding for the various discussions of Christian leadership. That is not to say that these authors have studiously avoided the use of Scripture as an appropriate place to begin. Clearly that is not the case. However, even here there seems to be little agreement about which passages or individuals might be the most helpful or suggestive: Abraham, Nehemiah, Moses, Samson, David, John the Baptist, Jesus, Barnabas, Paul, or one of several alternatives? An alternative is to develop a synthetic approach, drawing principles from the leadership displayed by the collection of biblical leaders I’ve just listed. Or should we instead prioritise the example of Jesus with what we might call a christocentric approach? Frustratingly, none of these approaches is without its hermeneutical or exegetical challenges.

Despite these unanswered questions and uncertainties, the fact remains that many Christians find themselves in situations where they are required to exercise leadership and some of these are keen to exercise their leadership as a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth. What resources are there to help church and other Christian leaders struggling with this question?

The New Testament leaves little room for doubt that Jesus came to understand himself as fulfilling the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. His self-identification as a servant, ‘I am among you as one who serves’, underlines this simple observation. Running throughout passages such as Matthew 20:20-28; Mark 10:35-45; and Philippians 2:1-11 is a theme of service and we find these and other New Testament authors making frequent allusions and references to Old Testament passages describing a

However, the frequent use of ‘servant’ by Jesus merely serves to deepen the apparent paradox whereby the early church arrived at its confession of Jesus as ‘Lord’ (in the Greek this is the word κυρίος). This appears to have been used by the early church as an alternative to the oath of loyalty required by the Imperial Roman rulers; “Caesar is Lord!” The early church readily embraced the Lordship of Jesus as a central feature of its liturgical life and worship. The Christology of the early church, what it believed about Jesus, implies a limitation of imperial authority over the lives of those who saw themselves as citizens of another Kingdom. More obviously, it is a clear rejection of Caesar’s claim to divinity. The early church worshipped Jesus, not Caesar, as the Lord; the true Lord of life whose authority extends over every aspect of human life.

The extent to which we may understand Jesus as both ‘Servant’ and ‘Lord’ lie at the heart of attempts to use his life and legacy as a resource for modern leadership theory and practice. The way that Jesus, the servant, reacted to the oppressive exercise of imperial Roman power has provided contemporary Christian leaders with a resource for framing their own understanding and practice of leadership. However, this is certainly complicated by the fact that, according to Edwards (p325), ‘At no place do the ethics of the kingdom of God clash more vigorously with the ethics of the world than in the matters of power and service.’ Seeking to clarify leadership practices against this complex background, a cue has been taken from biblical passages dealing with power and service given the prominence over the last fifty years of the theory and practice of servant leadership. A brief discussion of the origin of this view of leadership will be helpful and to that task we now turn.

**SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND ROBERT GREENLEAF’S WORK**

The study of leadership typically oscillates between analysis and artistry. During periods of leadership crisis, the former is typically given more attention. During periods of leadership confidence, the latter tends to receive more attention. However, Robert Greenleaf (1904-1990) faced the uncertainties framing the period of his own career as an AT&T director of management research in order to develop a durable and creative approach to understanding the nature of leadership (Greenleaf, 2003). Greenleaf was a committed Quaker and introduced the concept of ‘servant leadership’ into the discussion of organisational leadership during the late 1960s and 1970s on the back of a successful managerial career.

His understanding of servant leadership emerged intuitively whilst reading the novel *Journey to the East* by Hermann Hesse in which the leadership of a mythical group of pilgrims is finally revealed to have been in the hands of their servant, Leo. Hesse’s writings were heavily inspired by Buddhism and Greenleaf’s Quaker beliefs readily accommodated insights from Hesse.

After Greenleaf’s death, the consulting and publishing business he established has continued to attract attention within the not-for-profit and the commercial sectors. An edited collection of his private writings demonstrates clearly his essentially religious worldview (Fraker and Spears, 1996). Prosser (2007, pp.5-7) notes the extensive use the Greenleaf made of the Old and New Testaments in his reflections.

The attraction of Greenleaf’s work to practitioners and students of Christian leadership is obvious. He was comfortable with the language of spirituality and faith (albeit in a Quaker accent). Secondly, his attention to the servant nature of leadership resonates with Old Testament passages that make reference to the servant nature of the Messiah as well as to New Testament understandings of the person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Thirdly, he was encouraged and invited to address his thinking directly to Christian organisations, including theological colleges and seminaries.

Greenleaf found quite a number of willing and active collaborators within various Christian organisations and churches. Among these we might mention Professor Stephen Prosser (2007, p10) and Bishop Bennett Sims (Sims, 1997, pp.11-12). Sims collaborated with Greenleaf in establishing the *Institute for Servant Leadership* in North Carolina. In Greenleaf’s model, these Christian leaders and others like them, found a convincing alternative to existing models which imagined a leader with superhero traits and capacities; models that elevated the individual leader with positional authority. These models were
becoming increasingly difficult for some Christian leaders to adapt with authenticity and integrity. They consequently turned to Greenleaf’s work on servant leadership for a more convincing expression of specifically Christian leadership (see Prosser, pp.7-9 for a brief overview of other Christian authors also influenced by Greenleaf).

The use of the servant leadership metaphor by Christian leadership practitioners and writers, whilst mostly rooted in Greenleaf’s work, has continued to adapt and modify his insights. This has been undertaken without consistency of methodological approach, scriptural defence, and in the absence of a thoroughgoing philosophical or epistemological foundation (Wallace, p1). So, let’s take a look at a broadly representative sample of that work.

THE USE OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP MODELS AND GREENLEAF’S WORK BY CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP PRACTITIONERS AND AUTHORS

Each of the authors surveyed here is concerned primarily with the dyad of leadership and service, given their acknowledged (and occasionally unacknowledged) reliance upon Greenleaf’s work. Clinton (pp74-76) offers only a brief discussion of servant leadership but it demonstrates the early engagement that Christian leaders in the late 1980s were beginning to have with Greenleaf (see Clinton’s reference to Kirkpatrick’s work in 1988, p75). Initial Christian responses to Greenleaf’s work began with an exploration of the likely applicability of his model for specifically Christian leadership (Sims, pp9-12; Prosser, pp4-9). Young (p18) makes direct references to Greenleaf and notes that he established close organisational links with Greenleaf’s centre. Lundy (p.97) and Prosser (viii) refer to Greenleaf’s work. Indeed Prosser admits to being ‘inspired by what I read’ (Prosser, p3) and Agosto (p.6) draws attention to Greenleaf’s use of the Bible in developing his servant leadership model. Although Rodin and Ford are critical of the concept of servant leadership, they both concede that no other leadership model has been ‘embraced as much by the Christian community as servant leadership’ (Rodin, p81; Ford, p85).

Several authors locate the dyad within the nature or character of God (Sims, p13; Rodin, p34) whilst others regard Jesus as a role model (Blanchard, p13), an exemplar (Prosser, p7) a prototype (Sims, p16), or the paradigmatic servant-leader (Lundy, pp45-46; Agosto, p199) who, in some instances, may even embody servant leadership (Russell, p4). The biblical passages they discuss in support of the concept of servant leadership include Isaiah 49-53; Matthew 20:20-28; Mark 10:35-45; Luke 22:24-30; John 13:1-17; and the epistle of Jude. From these passages, several lists of either qualities or principles of servant-leadership are derived. These include seven qualities found in the ‘suffering servant’ chapters of Isaiah (Young); five principles drawn from Jude and a further nineteen aspects of a theology of biblical leadership (Wright, 2009, p11); eight biblical principles of servant leadership (Kirkpatrick, 1988. Cited in Clinton) and the wider range of traits outlined by Prosser (pp13-22).

Given the differing lists of qualities and principles it seems that discerning the ‘Who?’ and the ‘What?’ of a servant leader is a fraught exercise; arguably more of an interpretive art than an exegetical science. This requires further comparative work and is something for another day. Of more immediate concern is the way in which those authors writing about servant leadership outline and define the dynamic and relationship that exists between the notions of service and leadership. Several begin with caveats such as ‘the Bible is not exactly a book about leadership’ (Agosto, 2005, p1), some explicitly avoid biblical exposition in the search for leadership terminology and ideas (Prosser, viii), and at least one studiously avoids the use of the title ‘leader’ on the basis that Jesus rejected all such titles (Ford, p51).

By this point, the astute reader may have begun to wonder whether there is in reality a coherent basis for carrying the discussion any further. If this were in any doubt, it only requires us to examine more carefully the way that the concepts of ‘servant’ and ‘leader’ shape each other, particularly when used in the hyphenated construct ‘servant-leader’.

Early leadership theories argued that effective leaders demonstrate a number of universal traits and values. Among these, at least for Christian writers, service and stewardship are to be found (Clinton, p16). Some writers see service as a quality of leadership and use servanthood and servant-leadership interchangeably (Sims, ix). Yet others have tried to distinguish the role of leader from the identity of servant (Sims, p18). 
A sizeable cluster of writers tries to integrate the role of servant with that of the leader. Several commonalities exist within this cluster, including a core conviction that ‘leadership is an act of service’ (Blanchard, 2003, p12. Emphasis mine). Not all servants serve as leaders though they may become leaders and servant-style leading may become leadership (Young, p19, 28). Some from this group state it quite bluntly, ‘leadership is for servants, for serving not ruling’ (Wright, p11) whilst others put it more prosaically, ‘Leaders who are servants first will assume leadership only if they see it as the best way they can serve.’ (Lundy, p230)

A smaller cluster of authors attempts to open up the existing evangelical status quo regarding servant leadership by calling for a thorough-going discussion of ‘servanthood’ free from its association with ‘leader’ (Ford, p11). If there is no willingness to do this, they insist, the concept of servant leadership will remain inevitably and unhelpfully paradoxical as a metaphor for Christian leadership. Few writers seem to acknowledge that the paradox rests in the hyphenation of two terms derived from quite different sources. Service and servanthood are well attested in various biblical passages and are evaluated there in an almost universally positive fashion. The practice of leadership, in contrast, is shaped by a growing and increasingly diverse body of theoretical literature. In addition to this, leadership has a troubled Scriptural career and its practice is frequently regarded with ambivalence by the biblical authors. Servant leadership has been championed as one way of alleviating the impact of those critical voices. Whether it successfully continues to do this remains an open question.

‘Over the past forty years the idea of servant leadership entered the church leadership conversation. But leaders could not bear the concept of “servanthood” as a stand-alone term. “Leadership” had to be added to the equation. Being a servant is the form of leadership urged upon us by Jesus [and] the ethos of leadership is not a posture but a result.’ (Ford, p85,86)

Attending to ‘servant leadership’ is primarily a study of leadership whilst an investigation of service, or stewardship, is primarily a study of divine call (Rodin, p76). This insight is primarily an insight into methodological approach or, if you prefer, our theoretical starting point. Discussions of servant leadership are primarily conducted by Christian authors with reference to the wider leadership literature whilst discussions of service and servanthood by them are mostly conducted with reference to the theological perspective of the biblical texts. Such a statement isn’t intended to limit the potential value of leadership literature to leaders in the Christian churches or their related agencies. It’s intended simply to reveal the complexity of integrating leadership theory and biblical theology. Several potentially destructive consequences flow out of this complex relationship where it is not given adequate or careful attention. These can all be found among the authors reviewed above and three of these follow immediately.

The first, though least common, consequence is illustrated in the work of Blanchard who appears to commit to Jesus-like servant leadership yet who goes on to integrate it with his own model of Transactional Leadership. He sees in this an effective way of determining when the servant leader must choose to delegate, support, coach, or direct (Blanchard, p73-83). A second consequence is to underestimate the relevance of the ‘call to service’ for all church and Christian leadership (on this, see Rodin, pp76-83), typically reserving it for individuals ordained to church ministries or those commissioned for overseas mission service. The third is to accept uncritically the theoretical grounding of servant leadership and merely unearth biblical passages that are alleged to support leadership models outlined elsewhere. This is the most common consequence and underscores the need for a more robust discussion of the biblical material that is regularly cited by Christians writing about servant leadership.

WHERE ARE THE SERVANT LEADERS IN THE BIBLE?

The most extensive biblical treatments of servant leadership include those of Wright, who discusses the model with reference to the Epistle of Jude, and that of Young who outlines six qualities of a servant leader that he claims to have distilled from the portrait of the suffering servant depicted in Isaiah chapter forty-nine onwards. Much of the biblical exposition found elsewhere is more cursory than these
two instances. However limited the breadth or scope of their biblical exegesis or exposition, the conclusions may go on to gain unwarranted significance when they pass into what may be described as the ‘canon’ of biblical reflection on servant leadership.

Robert Russell is another writer who tackles several biblical passages in a more than cursory fashion and his work deserves particular attention as we turn now to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark.

Russell implies that there is a broader biblical witness to servant leadership than the number of biblical texts seems to actually warrant. He describes Matthew 20:20-28 and Mark 10:35-45 as ‘among the important scriptures’ and discusses other passages (the Servant Songs in Isaiah, Luke 22:25-30, and John 13:1-7) as ‘among the important supplementary scriptures reviewed’ (p1). The rather disingenuous way he refers to his selection of passages conceals the fact that these passages pretty much exhaust the biblical passages that may be construed as referring to servant leadership, or at the very least to ‘service’ and ‘greatness’.

Russell’s reading of Matt 22:20-28 and Mk 10:35-45 is informed by a prior commitment to servant leadership. ‘The primary purpose of this article is to examine the biblical texts that relate to the concept of servant leadership and thereby build a theological foundation for the leadership theory’ (Russell, p1). This is not necessarily an unhelpful way of reading these texts, but Russell adopts an unacknowledged hermeneutic shaped by this prior commitment and as a consequence his hermeneutical approach is insufficiently self-critical and results in some startling statements.

For example, at the outset of his textual investigation, Russell confidently asserts that ‘the aforementioned passages directly address the issue of leadership. They clearly indicate that Jesus saw himself as a servant leader’ (Russell, p4). Russell does not substantiate these assertions from the text of the passages he examines; he simply states a conviction that he has already assumed to be the case. Elsewhere he concludes (with reference to the Isaiahic passages) that it is in his *leadership* role, that Jesus restores ‘both Jews and Gentiles to relationship with God through salvation’ (p6). This is a clumsy construction at best and theologically misleading at worst. The problem that lurks at the heart of Russell’s statement here is that they sideline the contributions of Jesus’ service and sacrifice to human salvation. Writing about Mark 10, Edwards (p321) observes ‘The economy of God’s kingdom is not based on power and control but on service and giving, for the latter are not only the ethics of the kingdom but the *means of redemption*.’ (Emphasis mine)

Russell believes that Jesus’ alleged demonstration of servant *leadership* in these passages is a response to his disciples seeking elevated status in the anticipated kingdom announced by Jesus. Reflecting on the interaction of Jesus with his disciples, Russell (p3) casually concludes that ‘Jesus acknowledges there would be exalted places of leadership’. The text of the passage actually says, *contra* Russell’s misinterpretation, ‘to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant’ (Matt 20:23). It is probably more accurate to interpret this phrase as inferring positions relating to the coming judgement (compare this with Matt 19:28; 25:31-46). To be on the right and left may indicate a position of honour, held by loyal individuals in royal service. It does not necessarily suggest a ‘leadership’ position for James and John. Whatever it is that is sought d by James and John, the right to grant these positions is clearly not held by Jesus, despite his authority as a purported servant leader. A less committed interpretation by Russell would have allowed a less constrained interpretation of the text of Matthew.

Central to Russell’s analysis of these passages are claimed to be ‘three critical components that support the concept of servant leadership’ (p3). In the first, according to Russell, Jesus identifies the oppressive nature of Imperial Roman rule. In the second, Jesus equates the greatness of his Messianic rule with humility and service. In the third, he identifies himself as a servant. Russell summarises by insisting that these, taken together, ‘directly indicate that Jesus saw himself as a servant leader’ (p4). One does not have to reject Russell’s identification of these central components in order to disagree with his conclusions relating to Jesus’ servant *leadership*. Russell’s singular focus obscures the fact that these texts clarify an understanding of *service and servanthood* whilst, secondly, lending undue weight to the view that they clarify an understanding of *leadership*. Indeed, the examples of ‘ruling’ referred to in Matt 20:25 are despotic and autocratic examples of imperial Roman rule. In this respect, if such
examples of imperial Roman rule could be described as leadership in any way, they would be judged as inauthentic leadership, at least according to the conventions of most contemporary leadership theories (see Northouse, p384; Bass and Riggio, p15).

READING MATTHEW IN CONTEXT

So, what might there be in these texts, especially Matthew 20:20-28, for church and Christian leaders looking for deeper insights into their leadership roles? An immediate point to note is that Matthew is writing as an acknowledged authority within the early church, as one of the evangelists, one of the witnesses to the good news about Jesus. He probably understood himself as a ‘servant of Christ’ (as did Peter, in 2 Pet 1:1; James, in Jam 1:1; and Paul, in Rom 1:1). Matthew surveys the churches, which acknowledged his apostolic credentials, from a similar perspective to that of many contemporary church leaders. He is to be found among them, an elder with authority, and he frames the Gospel narrative in a way that addresses what he sees as the immediate pastoral concerns for the churches of the first century.

Gundry (p6) grounds his hermeneutic in the pastoral concerns of Matthew and suggests that Matthew is warning against the presence of false, authoritative leaders in the early church (Mt 7:21-23; 23:1-36). Matthew argues that ecclesiastical leaders must reject honorific titles (Mt 23:8-10), they must humble themselves (Mt 18:4; 23:12). Through service, as opposed to self-seeking, they must adopt the position of little people in the church (Mt 18:3; 23:11). In other words, they must be meek, like Jesus, the persecuted teacher of righteousness who gave himself for others (Mt 20:20-28) (Gundry, p7).

Newman draws attention to the persecution faced by Matthew’s readers (10:16-23, 25; 20:22) which the disciples, including James and John, can’t hope to escape given that their master has already suffered a self-giving death. Stanton (1992) suggests, on the other hand, that Matthew is writing in response to conflict in the synagogue between the followers of Jesus and those of traditional Judaism; a view adopted by most commentators. Overman (1996) suggests that the focus is a conflict within the church due to recent arrivals provoking a crisis of authority and leadership. Consequently, Matthew sets out ‘to cast further doubts about the dominant leadership’ patterns being introduced (Overman, p20-21). Carter (2000, 2001) bases his interpretation on the view that Matthew’s primary context is one in which imperial Roman rule was being experienced as brutal and oppressive. Matthew’s gospel is thus written to a church under the pressure of persecution and is a reminder of the need to remain loyal to the messianic rule of Jesus.

Noting the scholarly discussion, it may be worth heeding R.T. France’s caution against too narrowly determining the purpose of Matthew’s gospel (1989, p119-122) and recognise that this caution may be just as relevant when it comes to identifying the context for his gospel. It is likely that Matthew intended it to be read in any one of several diverse contexts, albeit with some common elements present in those contexts. Among the latter we may expect that imperial Roman rule, discrimination and persecution, and questions of leadership within the community were enduring issues for the early church. We’ll take these up as we begin a closer examination of Matthew and Mark without limiting too narrowly the focus or context for our investigation. That being said, the contextual commonalities sketched here do deserve serious consideration. The dialectic between imperial Roman rule and messianic rule is sufficient cause alone for explaining the generation of hostility and persecution against the Christian citizens and subjects of the Roman Empire. It’s equally possible to speculate that a consequence of hostility towards the early church would be a growing uncertainty among the believers concerning leadership in the early church. They can be imagined wondering whether the leadership was sufficiently expedient in the stance it had adopted towards the imperial authorities. In such situations, the moral authority of leadership may typically emerge as an inevitable casualty.

Warren Carter’s commentary (2000, 2001) is a clear and persuasive reconstruction of the imperial Roman context in which the early church grew and spread. He argues that Matthew’s gospel carries a bold critique of the sovereignty of the Roman Empire, issuing a social challenge, with its alternative vision of community, and a theological challenge that outlines a vision of the coming sovereign rule of God. Commenting on Matthew 20:29, Carter (2000, p403) writes,
Jesus, in Matt 20:25, ‘exposes the nature of the present [imperial system] as a world in which sinful, brutish, and death-bringing power operates’ (Carter, 2000, p406). As an alternative to this trend, ‘Jesus’ resurrection shows that that is not the only way in which power can be used, that God’s life-giving power overcomes abusive imperial power. Carter then highlights the manner in which the claims of Jesus in Matt 20:25 are radicalised through the use of ‘Lord’ with reference to Jesus. This becomes an assault on the ‘lording’ of the imperial powers. As the ‘Lord’, Jesus has ‘life-giving authority’ over judgement and other human authorities (Matt 7:21-22), (Carter, 2000, p403). For Carter, the ‘ruling over’ of Mt 20:25 is inevitably destructive and remains a pervasive theme throughout Matthew’s gospel.

SERVANTS AND SLAVES WITH STATUS AND IMPORTANCE

Correctly understanding the dialectic of imperial rule versus messianic rule is key to interpreting the use that Jesus makes of μεγας (‘great’) and πρωτος (‘first’) in Matthew 20 and elsewhere. The Greek word μεγας (lit. megas) in this context can be taken to mean ‘a person of importance’, normally used of a prince or governor. It is used less commonly as a contrast with ‘younger’ (Lk 22:26) where it is used in the case of somebody who has ‘grown to maturity’ (Heb 11:24). Intriguingly, John the Baptist is described by Jesus as the ‘greatest of men’ yet he states that even John is surpassed in greatness by μικρος (‘little ones’ or ‘small ones’) who exercise humility and service in the Kingdom of God (Mt 11:11).

Service and servanthood are clearly major themes of Matthew 20, given its repeated references to διακονος (‘servant’) and δουλος (‘slave’); its response to status and authority; and its pre-figuring of Jesus’ messianic rule. Perhaps unsurprisingly therefore, few commentators seem as convinced as is Russell that the text refers to servant leadership. Russell may not be wholly unjustified in seeing these elements as helping to define contemporary notions of leadership but it is false logic on his part to argue that leadership is therefore the theme of the passage.

Jesus uses ‘great’ elsewhere in Matthew’s gospel (see Newman and Stine for the following summary). It is used to discuss importance and rank within the Kingdom of Heaven (18:1). To understand Jesus’ use of ‘great’, a change of attitude is required; a readjustment to how one understands authority and power (18:3). Those who are truly ‘great’ will be as unconcerned about their status, rank and importance as will the little children they are called to emulate (18:4, esp. NRV and TEV). Matthew writes pastorally, implying that the nameless members of the congregations that he knows well are the ‘great ones’ in the Kingdom of God.

The mother of James and John shows respect for Jesus as one of the ‘greats’, with power to ‘promise’, ‘grant’, ‘give orders’ or even ‘command’ (Mt 20:21). Matthew’s use of προσκυνειν (Mt 20:20) indicates petition or submission before one of high authority (Gurtner, p56). This heightened sense of dramatic expectation merely serves to underline the apparently deflationary response from Jesus that he does not possess the authority sought by the mother.

Of course, this may be intended to deflect her use of the imperative ‘Grant!’ or ‘Declare!’ (Mt 20:21). The tone of deference she has shown in Mt 20:20 recedes and reveals clearly that she and her sons fail to understand the nature of God’s empire. In it there can be no domination, prestige and importance, only service and humility (Carter, 2000, p402). Jesus states bluntly that he cannot promise, grant, give orders, or command (also noted by Carter, 2000, p402). This authority belongs to the Father alone and the Father will reserve places of honour for the truly ‘great’. Furthermore, we should expect to see some people sitting in the seats of greatness who are currently not free to make decisions on their own behalf, let alone on behalf of any followers, for among the ‘greats’ will be servants and slaves (Mt 20:23). In matter of fact, greatness may be as much on display in the glorious accomplishments of death as much as through the glorious accomplishments of life (Mt 20:28). Messianic humility and service carry a commitment to the ‘giving of one’s life as a ransom for others. It points up the extreme to which service may attain – and did.’ (Gundry, p404)
With the shift in language of Mt 20:27, ‘Great’ becomes ‘first’ and ‘servant’ becomes ‘slave’. This illustrates another tricky aspect of interpretation. ‘Great’ and ‘first’ are generally interpreted as shorthand for leadership by Russell and other servant leadership writers. However, this assumes that greatness and status in these passages can be sufficiently redeemed and, therefore, sought after aspects of the general social order. Greatness and status are thereby located firmly in the secular world (of imperial rule) whilst service and slavery continue to be seen as reasonable, or desirable, only within the realm of the Kingdom of God. If that is true, then authentic greatness or leadership which serves and empowers (Mt 20:26) can be contrasted with inauthentic rule, or leadership, which is self-serving and authoritarian (Mt 20:25). The first may be welcomed as messianic with the second being dismissed as imperial.

However, we have suggested that an essential dialectic in this passage exists in the tension between the messianic rule of Jesus and the imperial rule of Caesar. That suggests an alternative interpretation of the way that Jesus intends us to understand ‘greatness’. If ‘great’ and first’ are to be primarily understood with reference to the messianic rule, then what is required is a new way of talking about ‘greatness’ and ‘status’. This requires us to redefine greatness and status with reference to his messianic rule and to our life in the messianic community. Quite simply, there can be no biblically authentic definition or expression of greatness and status that moves beyond the twin domains of ‘service’ and ‘humility’. To put it another way, all there is to be said about Christian leadership can be said with reference to just these two words. Humility and sacrificial service are not steps to greatness, they are the greatness that is the hallmark of the Kingdom of God, of Jesus’ messianic rule.

This insight is vital for it is a necessary way of avoiding the temptations to lust and power that accompany all forms of imperial leadership and ruling (Mt 20:21,24,25). Mark’s use of κατακυριεύειν (‘exercising authority’) in Mk 10:42 is, for example, used in the sense of ‘gaining mastery or power over others’, ‘to subdue’, or ‘to function as a despot’ (Edwards, p325). The only alternative narrative for negotiating authentic positional authority ‘comes from Jesus’ own biography’ (Mt 20:22). Overman (p288) notes that Matthew’s retention of hierarchic language may be ironic, given that wherever it is used it provokes jealousy and rivalry. He does not thereby imply that Matthew rejects hierarchy, leaders, or authority out of hand, but he reminds us that the use of honorific titles (as was common in Jesus’ day) is to be rejected (Mt 23:8-12). We can only understand Matthew’s eschewal of such titles if we understand this: even the title of ‘Rabbi’, used only twice by Matthew of Jesus, is found both times on the lips of Judas.

ROYAL SERVANTS OF THE MESSIANIC HOUSEHOLD

In referring to the Gentile rulers’ abuse of power (Mat 20:25), Jesus re-conceives status in the messianic community or kingdom (20:21) as bonded service (20:26). Such service could be entered into willingly with the prospect of seeking release from a debt owed in the fullness of time. However, it was accompanied by the forfeiture of social status and personal freedom. It also implies utter reliance on the one to whom bonded service was being rendered. Thus, if it is service in the Kingdom, rendered to the messiah, it is not inconceivable that we are to understand this as ‘royal service’. The concealed ‘drive for power’ inherent in the ambition for money, fame, and influence (Stott, 2002, p40) is beyond the reach of the bonded slave. Status in the messianic community, though granted to servants and slaves with no prospect of imperial or commercial success, is nevertheless the status of royal servant.

The messianic rule of Jesus in the kingdom, of God, is one which honours him with the status of κυριος (‘Lord’). Chris Wright points out that it is a transliteration of the Hebrew adonai, used when reading references to ¥HWH in the biblical text (Wright, 2006, p108). In this respect, the concept of ‘Lord’, when used of Christ, would appear to be a reference to his divinity rather than a reference to any leadership that he might be understood to have exercised.

Carter suggests that the human experience of slavery (lived at the social margins between the point of entry into slavery and the hoped for manumission or release) parallels the Christian self-understanding of life as a slave. The experience of a slave, despised by others, is one through which great honour could accrue to the slave by his or her association with a great household. This has its parallel in the final
promise of ‘eschatological vindication’. The slave metaphor applies to all disciples; there are to be no ‘masters’ claiming ownership over members of the messianic community. Instead of hierarchy there is equality. ‘Enslavement to God, not domination of others, marks their identity and the social structure of this community which embodies God’s empire’ (Carter, p404). Matthew characteristically describes the disciple as a learner, over whom Jesus has all authority (Gundry on Mt 28:18-20, pp594-597). Service and humility in the royal community of the Messiah are patterned on a Messiah who does not insist on being served (Mt 20:28). His service to others, beyond the point of death, involves their being sprung free from captivity to the bondage of sin.

Commenting on Mark 10, Edwards notes that ‘All servants of Christ serve, some may lead.’ Servants appear to be pre-eminent in the kingdom of God because the sole function of a servant is to give and giving is of the essence of God. Edwards continues, ‘the ideas that Jesus presents regarding rule and service are combined in a way that find no obvious precedent in either the OT or Jewish tradition’ (Edwards, p325) and this despite the references in Isaiah 49 depicting a ‘servant to rulers’. In attempting to find parallels with the linking of service and ruling (see Mt 20:26-7) Carter directs our attention to the Hellenistic tradition of the ideal king as the servant of his people, exemplified in Plato’s Republic (Carter, p403). He also notes that the school of philosophers known as the Cynics used the idea to describe a philosopher-ruler; described in Seneca’s Epistles.

Jesus as the humble servant of God is the model for the Matthean communities. They are the ‘little ones’, the ‘meek’, the ‘poor in spirit’, and the ‘unlearned ones’ whose cause will be vindicated at the future coming of the Son of man himself (Mt 25:31-46). Matthew maintains a certain tension between Jesus as the humble and meek ‘chosen servant’ and the glory of his future coming as Son of Man and judge. Stanton suggests that all forms of Christian leadership ultimately seem to sit somewhere in the pivot between humility and glory (Stanton, p381). We have tried to suggest, rather, that the more authentic forms of Christian leadership sit at the pivot between humility and service.

SOME TENTATIVE IMPLICATIONS FOR MISSIONAL LEADERSHIP

In choosing the title ‘Your will be done: Mission in Christ’s Way’ (Wilson, 1990 and compare Samuel, 1989) the 1989 Conference on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, pointed to new images of mission that eschewed power and violence. In preparing for this conference, evangelicals issued the Stuttgart Statement which acknowledged that mission in Christ’s way required ‘humility’ on the part of ‘unworthy servants, earthenware vessels’ entrusted with the priceless treasure of the Gospel (Samuel, 1989, p212).

I assume that Christian leadership is a helpful way of describing the nature and function of co-operative activity by individuals working towards the common goals they share as royal servants within the community of the Messiah, Jesus the Lord. My insistence that ‘leadership’ concepts are absent in Matthew 20:20-28 is not to be taken that I have a problem with Christian leadership per se. Nor do I believe that the metaphor and practice of servanthood is of no value to contemporary leadership. On the contrary, if we are to adequately deal with the temptations towards the abuse of power and authority, these texts are vital to a proper appreciation of the contribution that Christian virtues (humility, patience, kindness, diligence, chastity, abstinence, and liberality) can make to a contemporary understanding of authentic, moral leadership (see Wallace, 2006, p2). Understanding this will allow the development of a biblically informed practical theology of leadership that takes adequate account of service and humility.

Of course, this discussion has left unexamined the detailed discussion of how the concepts of service and humility shape the contemporary practice of Christian leadership. What it has sought to do, instead, has been to investigate what the mission of Christ, especially through his service of others, means for a contemporary discussion of Christian leadership models. As Keener (1999, p488) argues with reference to Matthew 20:20-28, ‘...in Philippians 2:1-11 the evangelists treat their audiences to this summary of Jesus’ mission ... to provide an active model for Christian living.’ Understood in this sense, the notion of missional service and humility extends across the totality of the Christian life and experience, including
those areas where the Christian may be required by circumstances, or other people, to exercise leadership, individually and corporately.

If Christ came to serve others in humility, rather than to be served, then perhaps we might at least countenance for a moment the notion that, in like fashion, he did not come to lead, but to be led. In turning the metaphor on its head in this way we may see more readily the subversive intent of Jesus in John 13:1-17 (see Russell, 2003, p6). This is the impact intended by Stephen Cottrell’s turning of familiar metaphors upside down. He pictures leadership differently (Cottrell, 2009) by referring to the need to ‘jump off the bandwagon’, to ‘hit the ground kneeling’, to ‘let the grass grow under your feet’, to ‘state the obvious’, to ‘spoil the broth’, to ‘count your chickens before they’re hatched’ and to ‘reinvent the wheel’.

By redefining the concepts of greatness and status within the Kingdom of God with reference to the hallmarks of service and humility, Jesus initiates a revolution of ruling and leadership. This is a vital insight for those who lead churches and Christian organisations. It is also a much-needed corrective for the kind of evangelistic leadership that is frequently little more than imperialism, building ‘human empires instead of the Kingdom of God’ (Stott, 2002, p41). This all too frequent experience has led some missiologists to call for new metaphors of mission and missional leadership that shun imperial images in favour of those describing ‘God’s eternal reign’ (Skreslet, 2006, pp15-18).

Far from the throne-rooms and boardrooms, the ‘scum’ of the earth (1 Cor 4:13) are exercising a ministry of service and humility that is frequently regarded with contempt, is typically accompanied by sacrificial suffering, yet which is capable of a revolution of cosmic scale, for it is a call to royal service in a Kingdom against which the gates of Hades will not prevail (Mt 16:18).

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Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. How does redefining the concepts of greatness and status within the kingdom of God, with reference to the hallmarks of service and humility, initiate a revolution of ruling and leadership?
2. What new images or metaphors of leadership and mission do the church need if we are to eschew power and violence?
3. How do Christian virtues (humility, patience, kindness, diligence, chastity, abstinence, and liberality) contribute to a contemporary understanding of authentic moral leadership?
4. How do we develop a biblically informed, practical theology of leadership that takes adequate account of service and humility and Christian virtues?

Beyond this unit, you may want to continue shaping and forming your practice of servantship in the following ways:

1. Look at the Christian leadership books on your shelf. Make a list of those influenced by servant leadership models and Greenleaf’s work. Write some notes about the influence of his writings on these books.
2. Read Isaiah 49-53; Matthew 20:20-28; Mark 10:35-45; Luke 22:24-30; John 13:1-17; and Jude. Have your ministry team discuss what these passages tell us about servanthood, discipleship, and ministry.
3. In a preaching series, focus on the themes in those passages and their implications for your church and its mission in the world.
4. Spend time learning about the disciplines of service. Engage in this learning individually and with others. Consider how this discipline shapes your discipleship to Jesus.

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