



The Kings of the Gentiles and the Leader Who Serves: Luke 22:24-30

DAVID L. TIEDE

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

INTRODUCTION: LEGITIMATE POWER AND SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Patrick Dolan is a management consultant who was once a Roman Catholic seminarian. His classical education and rhetorical skill have found a new context in the corporate boardroom, and his message is revolutionary. He is intent on liberating North American business from the hierarchial authority structures inherited by western society from the Roman order, especially from the army and the church. Dolan's analysis is straightforward: "The classic structure, tends to be 'non-listening' because it is assumed that the intelligence and talent to achieve goals, to structure and guide work, and to solve problems increase as one moves up the structure." By contrast, Dolan brings labor and management together with "strategies to get both sides listening, cooperating, and participating in the problem-solving process."¹

The chief executive officer of the Herman Miller manufacturing company is Max De Pree. He is also the chair of the Hope College board and a member of the board at Fuller Seminary. In his book, *Leadership Is an Art*, De Pree writes, "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In

¹"Patrick Dolan: Promoting workplace harmony is his way of changing the world," *Corporate Report, Kansas City* (July, 1988). See also Roxanne Spitzer-Lehmann, "The Woman Executive in the Non-Profit Institution," an interview with Peter F. Drucker in his book, *Managing the Nonprofit Organization* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990) 211: "Hospitals are very traditional; they are modeled very much on the military. But I think necessity is the mother of invention. And as the need for greater productivity, greater flexibility in roles, and ability to organize becomes more imperative in this competitive marketplace, more women will be assuming those roles" (i.e., of chief operating and chief executive officer).

between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor. That sums up the progress of an artful leader."²

These people have been reading Luke's gospel without the permission of the exegetical guilds. Church leaders may be lured by the siren songs of strategic planning, conjuring powerful self-images as CEO's in the business world. Surprise! These corporate gurus teach lessons about core values, respect for the vocations of others, and strategies to change the world through harmony and listening.

Every leader of a community or institution is now in the business of managing change with accountability to that group's mission and identity. Eastern European governments teeter on new foundations of authority and emerging economies, testing "the consent of the governed." Hardliners would reimpose hierarchial structures in church or state. They could prevail in Rome or Moscow, at least for a time.

But an alternative vision of authority has been glimpsed in the world. Far from the “divine right of kings” based on might or lineage, the legitimacy of this power is based in service. This authority is clearly revealed in the Messiah who reigned in self-sacrifice.

Gandhi and Martin Luther King startled the twentieth century by explicating the non-violent method for change implicit in the Sermon on the Mount. They were not reluctant about power, but their mode revealed the desperation of brute force. The leader who serves also presents a transforming vision of legitimate authority, where strength perfected in weakness is proved by God to be genuine power. Luke’s portrait of Jesus’ dominion is a definitive presentation of the model.

This vision of authority is part of the saving gospel of what God has done. God’s way of ruling sets a new standard and yields evangelical wisdom concerning the legitimate exercise of power.

I. “THE KINGS OF THE GENTILES LORD IT OVER THEM.”

Neither Jesus nor the evangelist denied the reality of power or pretended that the mission of the Messiah was unthreatening to established authorities. Luke’s account is especially full of references to the reigns of the emperors and the effects of their policies on Israel. The census by Augustus, who was proclaimed as the “Savior of Rome,” is the setting for the birth of Jesus, the “Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord” (2:1, 11). “The fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee...during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas” was the moment when “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness” (3:1-2). The expulsion of the Jews from Rome by the Emperor Claudius is identified in Acts 18:1-3 (see also Acts 11:28) as the occasion for Paul’s rendezvous with Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth and the ensuing conflicts with the local authorities.

Luke neither denounced these emperors nor indulged in the flattery to which they were accustomed. In order to contrast Caligula’s despotism with Octavian’s legitimate authority, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria was eager to

²Max De Pree, *Leadership is an Art* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1989) 11. See also Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist, 1977).

praise “him who in all the virtues transcended human nature, who on account of the vastness of his imperial sovereignty as well as nobility of character was the first to bear the name of the August.”³ But Luke’s focus is on the legitimacy of Jesus’ reign, not on offering a pro-Roman apology.

Luke’s critique of kingship in 22:24-30 reflects several traditions. Jesus’ words were filled with a vision of divine dominion which challenged all ruling authorities. The third evangelist, moreover, brought Jesus’ critique into a larger conversation in the hellenistic world about the ruler as “benefactor.”⁴ This was a concept or model of ideal kingship by which tyrants who coerced unwilling subjects could be distinguished from the king who was able to awaken in his subjects “so lively a desire to please him that they always wished to be guided by his will.”⁵ Oriental traditions of kingship had enriched the expectation of the king as “the saviour of his

subjects from their sins...a dynamic and personal revelation of deity.”⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer observes that “Luke’s insistence that ‘salvation’ comes to human beings through no other name under heaven (Acts 4:12) may well reflect his awareness of the contemporary custom of ascribing it to the Roman emperor and other ‘benefactors’ of humanity, and his denial of such deliverance through anyone else but Jesus whom he proclaims.”⁷

Luke enters this discussion with distinctive interests. In spite of the assurances of many traditional commentaries, the narrative’s social location must be inferred because the author is virtually anonymous. But anyone who uses “the kings of the gentiles” as the foil is still fundamentally at home in the Jewish community. Furthermore, if “their” gentile kings are the tyrants, and even their “benefactors” are “those in authority over them,” then “you” who are inside the Christian community stand apart. “We” are differentiated from them.

Careful study of Luke’s treatment of other authority structures will also be rewarding. The traditional argument that Luke’s narrative exonerated Pilate in Jesus’ death only made sense to interpreters who were intent on blaming “the Jews.” Pilate’s disdain for the temple authorities was well known beyond the New Testament and evident in Luke’s telling, and Pilate’s three-fold declaration of Jesus’ innocence and subsequent acquiescence to the will of the mob could only further damage his poor reputation in the Roman order.⁸

The encounters with the high priests are also fascinating for their lack of direct criticism. Paul even apologizes to the high priest because he knows the scripture that “You shall not speak evil of a leader of your people” (Acts 23:5). On the other hand, the high priests and the entire Sanhedrin prove themselves to be part of the fulfillment of the inspired word of “our ancestor David, your servant”: “the kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah” (see Acts 4:23-31). The speech of the

³“The Embassy to Gaius” 143.

⁴Frederick W. Danker, *Benefactor* (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1982).

⁵Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* I,i,5. See also Plato, *Politics* 276e, and Aristotle, *Politics* 285a.

⁶Erwin R. Goodenough, “The Political Philosophy of Hellenistic Kingship,” *Yale Classical Studies* 1 (1928) 91.

⁷*The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1981) 222.

⁸See David L. Tiede, *Prophecy and History in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 97-125.

Pharisee Gamaliel, “a teacher of the law, respected by all the people,” was also prophetic, warning that the authorities “may even be found fighting against God” (Acts 5:33-39).

This is an elaborate discussion in a traditional culture where those in authority positions will be quick to claim divine sanctions, as is evident in the attack on Paul for insulting “God’s high priest” (Acts 23:4). Luke is not eager to argue with those structures. But if legitimate authority finally comes from God, then those who oppose God’s will and reign have lost their legitimation. A new standard of legitimate power and authority has been revealed.

II. “I AM AMONG YOU AS ONE WHO SERVES.”

Luke is intent on identifying Jesus as the true “King of the Jews” from the birth oracles, through his ministry, to his execution, and in his vindication by God “as Messiah and Lord, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). There is no “messianic secret” in Luke, but the character and benefits of his reign are focal.⁹

The scriptural traditions of Davidic kingship in accord with God's promises provide the first line of legitimation (Luke 1:27, 68-71; 2:3-4, 11). This is the reign of God whose strength was long a challenge to the high and mighty, bringing down "the powerful from their thrones" (Luke 1:51-55). Luke agrees with Paul that God's wisdom in this initiative was a threat to the "rulers of this age" which they did not understand, "for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor 2:8).

Newly anointed by the Holy Spirit (see Luke 3:21-22; Acts 10:37-38), the Son of God faced profound spiritual and human testing concerning how he would exercise his office (Luke 4:1-13, 14-30). The reader knows well that Jesus is the authorized agent of God's reign, but the mode and content of this kingship are tested by alternative agendas and expectations. The temptations of personal advantage, illegitimate glory, and claims before God are all met with faithful appeals to the Scriptures (4:1-13). Jesus refuses to arrogate power to himself, but he will also not be deterred, even at peril of death, from God's purposes as revealed in the prophecies of Isaiah, including a decisive program of priority for the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed (4:14-40).

The determined purpose of this Messiah is therefore anchored in the will and plan of God. The acts of mercy and care for the vulnerable are not incidental to this mission. This is not an exercise in sentiment, but a divine campaign. True greatness is defined by hospitality toward children and those who are regarded as the least important. The ultimate standard has been established by "the one who sent me" (9:46-48). Thus, when Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51), he was not about to be deterred by reluctant Samaritans (9:52), the intimidation of Pilate or Herod (13:1-5, 31-32), or the religious and political cautions of the Pharisees (13:31-33; 14:1-7; 15:2). Jesus' acclaimed welcome in Jerusalem as "the king who comes in the name of the Lord" provoked rejection of his mission, driving him to his passionate oracle of doom for the city and his magisterial cleansing of the temple (19:21-48).

⁹This is another way of making the theological point that Mark's gospel is more focused on christology (the identity of Jesus as the crucified Messiah) and Luke's narrative is preoccupied with soteriology (the work or agency of Jesus the Messiah and its benefits).

page 27

Satan, Judas, and the chief priests and officers of the temple police formed an unholy alliance and put their plan into action. Our passage follows with Jesus' counsel to the disciples on true greatness. The great test still lay ahead, and Jesus struggled at the Mount of Olives over whether God's will could be accomplished by another course of action (Luke 22:42). Jesus' royal clemency from the cross (Luke 23:34, 42-43) and his submission to the will of the Father in death thus displayed the fulfillment of God's mission. Even the Roman centurion acclaimed him God's righteous ruler (Luke 23:47).¹⁰

The narrative is driven by a divine necessity, a firm conviction that God's will and plan are being enacted in accord with the scriptural promises. This is what legitimates Jesus as king and defines the content and character of his reign. Every other claim to legitimate authority, whether religious or political, is thus called into question by Luke's story of Jesus.

III. "I CONFER ON YOU A KINGDOM."

In a remarkable feature story about him, Archbishop Rembert George Weakland of

Milwaukee made the following comment:

“If you want to exercise any meaningful authority in the Church today, you have to listen not just to the most agreeable voices, and not solely to the edicts of Rome. Rather, you listen to where the spirit is—you hear one small voice, and you say, ‘That’s it!’ Not consensus—that’s no way to lead. I’m surely influenced by the third chapter of the Rule of St. Benedict: When anything important is brewing, you call the community together and listen for the spirit. And you allow the youngest, the least experienced member to speak first, so he won’t be overwhelmed by all the experts.”¹¹

Of course, Benedict had been reading Luke too! And Luke’s story not only demonstrated the validity of Jesus’ authority as Messiah and Lord—this Messiah also commended a vision of appropriate authority for his followers. Because this is the gracious way God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit works in the world, this is what real, legitimate authority looks like.

The primary force of the discussion in Luke 22:24-30 between Jesus and his disciples is directed toward what it meant that the Messiah was about to confer a kingdom on them. Jesus’ words are a stern correction against self-centered delusions of greatness. They also express the conferral of great authority.

The church is not the only community which has regularly confused this issue, either in the coercive use of power or by the manipulative denial of all authority. Both the corporate world and the political order offer ample displays of sinful humanity’s propensity to exploit power (see also Phil 2:6).

George Kennan’s design of the United States’ policy of the “containment of communism” has recently been vindicated for its confidence that the Cold War would be won by the superiority of democratic principles over totalitarianism. He was ridiculed by more aggressive anti-communists as a “theologian.” In turn he

¹⁰The word *dikaïos* means more than “innocent” on the lips of the guard who “praised God” and made this declaration. His word was an oracle, filled with meaning for those who knew that “the righteous one” is a christological title for Luke. See David L. Tiede *Luke* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988) 424-425.

¹¹Paul Wilkes, “The Education of an Archbishop - 1,” *The New Yorker* (July 15, 1991) 44.

called Henry Kissinger a “mechanic,” seeking to intervene and fix or destroy, while he saw himself as a “gardener,” tending the fields of international relations with patience, care, and hope. He understood that totalitarianism “is a disease to which all humanity is in some degree vulnerable.” But he argued, “There can be no genuine stability in any system which is based on evil and weakness in man’s nature—which attempts to live by man’s degradation, feeding like a vulture on his anxieties, his capacity for hatred, his susceptibility to error, and his vulnerability to psychological manipulation.”¹²

There is an alternative, a vision of authority grounded in service, of power legitimized in mercy. Revealed and enacted as the will of God in Christ Jesus, God’s mission will find its prophets in the corporate world, international affairs, and the church. The disciples of this Messiah bear the special calling of identifying and serving the legitimate authority of his reign.

¹²Quoted by William Pfaff in his editorial, "Kennan: A Vindicated Prophet," *Star Tribune: Newspaper of the Twin Cities* (September 5, 1991).