



Hierarchy Transfigured: Perspectives on Leadership in the New Testament

JOHN KOENIG

The General Theological Seminary, New York, New York

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. (Mark 9:2)

It would be a mistake, given our present anguish over the many inequalities that divide us so tragically from one another, to ignore the role played by rank in the ministries of Jesus and his early followers. Almost from the beginning some disciples are singled out to be with Jesus at crucial moments, while others are not. Disciples differ from one another in the spiritual gifts that are bestowed on them and, after the resurrection, in the various offices they are called to exercise. Some believers prove to be more “out-standing” than others, though not necessarily more mature or upright (one thinks immediately of Peter). Only Jesus himself combines authority with virtue in a perfectly God-pleasing way. A major challenge to the church at every moment of its history has been the raising up of leaders who can speak and act with the authority of Jesus, while at the same time modeling his life of servanthood (1 Pet 5:1-5).

Quite frequently the New Testament writers call our attention to individuals who emerge from local communities to become preeminent in the Lord. Sometimes these people are the apostolic authors themselves, but more often they are the addressees (a classical list occurs in Romans 16) or those whom the addressees are urged to honor (see, e.g., Rom 16:1-2; 1 Cor 16:15-18; 1 Thess 5:12-13; Col 4:12-13; Heb 13:17; 3 John 12; and the Acts of the Apostles in almost every chapter). Owing to the unusual productivity of their lives, certain believers are presented as exemplars. Paul, most likely operating in a rabbinic mode, dares to offer himself as

page 27

a model of faith and practice (1 Cor 4:15-17; 1 Thess 1:6; 2:9f.; 4:1). In addition, he takes the bold step of prioritizing both ecclesiastical offices and charismatic gifts in accord with what he believes to be their relative potential for building up the church (“God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers....Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy”—1 Cor 12:28; 14:1). Even in the community that composed the fourth gospel, which is held by some contemporary scholars to be of an egalitarian character, it is possible to identify individuals who stand out from the group as leaders: Peter (often in an ironic way); the Samaritan woman; Mary and Martha of Bethany; Mary Magdalene; and above all, the Beloved Disciple.¹

As I read the textual evidence, it seems neither accurate nor useful to commend certain models of leadership in the New Testament as “non-hierarchical,” while downplaying others that

are deemed hierarchical. It would be truer to the texts themselves, I think, and ultimately truer to the gospel to explore the ways in which all systems of ranking show themselves transfigured by their conformation to the crucified and risen Christ.² Here is a trial description of New Testament leadership that may help to guide us in these explorations: Leaders, as portrayed by the apostolic writers, seem to be those led into prominence as servants of Christ with gifts of discernment and boldness. The remainder of this essay consists of an attempt to unpack and test our definition.

I

All disciples are called and led, but some are led *into prominence*, with the result that they are remembered in the tradition as those who were particularly effective in their faithfulness to Christ and the gospel. A modern notion of saints, which suggests that they are people through whom we see God's gracious rule, comes close to the mark. Usually the prominence ascribed to New Testament leaders is comprised of words and actions alike, but often we are given only tiny glimpses of it, especially when women are involved.³

¹I believe, with Raymond E. Brown, that the Beloved Disciple was probably a real historical person. But within the fourth gospel itself this figure is already being idealized and treated as a symbol for leadership that could include women as well as men. See the helpful summary of contemporary scholarship on this matter in Gerald S. Sloyan, *What Are They Saying About John?* (New York/ Mahwah: Paulist, 1991) esp. 21, 48, 54, 86.

²For an exegetical look at how Paul understands rankings among believers, see my "Christ and the Hierarchies in 1 Corinthians" in *Christ and His Communities: Essays in Honor of Reginald H. Fuller*, ed. by Arland J. Hultgren and Barbara Hall (Cincinnati: Forward Movement, 1990) 99-113.

³Phoebe the deacon is praised by Paul in a single verse as "a benefactor of many and of myself as well" (Rom 16:2). Junia is "prominent among the apostles" (Rom 16:7), while Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis are distinguished as workers in the Lord, Persis especially (Rom 16:12). Euodia and Syntyche of Philippi are honored by Paul with the title "co-worker" (Phil 4:2f.). Tabitha/ Dorcas "was devoted to good works and acts of charity" (Acts 9:36). The names of Nympha (Col 4:15) and Mary of Jerusalem (Acts 12:12), both house church leaders, and Lydia the host of Paul in Philippi (Acts 16:14f., 40) also deserve mention. We know a little more about Prisca, who with her husband Aquila risked her neck for Paul's life (Rom 16:3) and acquired a notable reputation not only as a house church leader (1 Cor 16:9) but also as an itinerant missionary and teacher (Acts 18:1-4, 18, 24-26).

However, this is not the case with Mary Magdalene or Mary and Martha of Bethany, who represent instances of women's leadership at the earliest stratum of the tradition. They are close friends of Jesus, and their lives intertwine with his at critical moments of his ministry. They do not have titles (or if they did, these have disappeared from the gospel record); but their words and actions have caused them to be cited in a large number of sources as major figures in Jesus' extended family of disciples (Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1ff.; Matt 28:1; Luke 8:2; 10:38-41; John 11:1-12:8). It is no exaggeration to name Mary Magdalene the apostle to the apostles by virtue of her primal witness to Jesus' resurrection (John 20:1-18). Given the androcentric nature of our New Testament writings, it is worthy of note that we have considerably more information on the exemplary behavior of these three women than on that of most male leaders.⁴ Nevertheless, the names of the males are more frequently mentioned than those of their female counterparts and are relatively well known by Christians today. Thus we need not list them here.

What does deserve to be pondered is the fact that with some of these individuals we are given just enough biographical data to hypothesize a rudimentary process of leadership development. A good deal of attention is paid, for example, not only to the initial callings of

Peter and Paul but also to their increasing influence in the church. Peter is bold from the beginning but must learn through the trauma of his denial (Mark 14:66-72), his subsequent rehabilitation (Luke 24:34; John 21:15-23), and his education by the Spirit (Acts 10-11) to be a true leader for Christ. Likewise, Paul is taught by Ananias (Acts 9:10-19) and introduced by Barnabas not only to the disciples in Jerusalem but also to the church at Antioch (9:27; 11:25-26), with the result that his leadership in the broader church emerges gradually over a period of years (Acts 13-15). In his letters Paul himself also narrates segments of this pilgrimage from obscurity to prominence (1 Cor 2:1f.; 15:1-11; Gal 1:13-2:14), always giving credit to God or Christ for his accomplishments (Rom 15:18f.; 1 Cor 15:10; 2 Cor 12:1-10; Gal 1:15; 2:2, 20).

The key point of this story material is that precisely the most celebrated of the early church's leaders were *led* into their prominence.⁵ In the course of their development they are shown to have made numerous decisions, some of them involving great personal risk. Yet their paths are remembered by the church (in Paul's case through his own testimony) chiefly as records of guidance by God, the risen Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Peter, Paul, and their contemporaries never run for election to office. Instead, they find recognition and acceptance as leaders of the church through the gifts and fruit of the Spirit manifested in their ministries.

Here an observation on church leadership today seems in order. We cannot expect a great deal of our called and elected officials, at whatever level, unless they

⁴We know very little about what most of the twelve disciples and the majority of Paul's co-workers actually said or did.

⁵There are hints of a similar process at work in the lives of Barnabas, Philip the evangelist, James the brother of Jesus, Timothy, and Titus. Presumably the Beloved Disciple and Jesus' women followers were also led in such a manner (see John 16:13).

are also "chosen in the Lord" (Rom 16:13). This means that both they and the church body calling them forth must be able to give an account of their rise to prominence in which the guidance of the Trinity is evident. This in turn requires that considerable time be given to prayer and to the sharing of that prayer experience. In the New Testament sources both Peter and Paul appear as skillful expositors of their personal journeys as believers. Indeed, we can almost state it as a principle that true leaders in Christ will be those who can most convincingly articulate to the larger church the ways in which they themselves have been led by Christ.

II

Leaders are led into prominence, but a major qualifier must be added to this language of rank, namely, the phrase "as servants of Christ." Servanthood in and for Christ is the chief factor operative in all hierarchies involving believers. It cannot be accidental that Mark follows his story of Jesus' transfiguration not many verses later with the narration of a squabble among the disciples over who is the greatest among them. It seems not unlikely that this has developed as a result of the privileged experience granted to Peter, James, and John on the mountain of the transfiguration. In any case, the argument prompts Jesus' first pronouncement on leadership: "Whoever wants to be first must be last (*eschatos*) of all and servant (*diakonos*) of all" (Mark 9:35; see also vv. 33f.).

One chapter later Mark offers an expanded version of this saying, linking it with a request

by James and John that they be allowed to flank Jesus' throne at his messianic coronation. When the other disciples react with indignation and anger, Jesus delivers a broadside:

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant (*diakonos*), and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave (*doulos*) of all. For the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42-45)

It has become a truism that Christian leadership must be none other than servant leadership. But in our time we probably need to reclaim the christological dimension of this New Testament paradox. For servants *of Christ*, for those who follow him and are conformed to his death and resurrection, servanthood never means reduction in status. On the contrary, those who serve Christ find great power manifesting itself in their ministries (Rom 15:19; 1 Cor 2:1-5; 2 Cor 4:7; 12:9; Phil 3:10). Moreover, the consistent reception and employment of this power, especially through the use of *charismata*, confers a certain primacy upon servants (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:27-31). When they exercise a gift faithfully, recognition of their leadership follows.

Leader-servants will be those who prove especially adept at taking on their servant and slave roles appropriately, event by event, from the strength that God supplies (1 Pet 4:11) and in imitation of Jesus' own practice. Like him, they will lay

page 30

down their lives freely, when the time is right, give them voluntarily for the upbuilding of the church. Only as the result of a divine commission can such choices be made by ordinary humans; and indeed, such a commissioning turns out to be at the root of the *diakon-* word group. *Diakonos/diakonia/diakoneo* signify not table service as such but a task or office of high status in which the servant is authorized to act as emissary for a ruler or divinity.⁶ From contemporary sociological studies of the New Testament era we learn that much the same can be said about certain kinds of first-century slavery. Not infrequently people sold themselves to a wealthy or upper class master in order to gain status!⁷ This idea must lie behind Rom 6:12-23, where Paul urges his readers to present themselves to God for enslavement to divine righteousness. Leaders would be those who can act as exemplars of self-offering for repentance and renewal (Rom 12:1f.) and of a public cross-bearing that results in resurrection life for everyone who beholds their ministries (2 Cor 4:10-12). Here one thinks naturally enough of modern Christians like Bonhoeffer and Tutu, but there are saints in every congregation who fulfill similar callings.

In this sense, at least, leaders can be understood to function as servants and slaves "of all" (Mark 9:35; 10:44). It is very doubtful, however, that Jesus intended his words about servant leadership to become instruments for inducing pastoral burn-out. I find no evidence that New Testament leaders simply allowed the felt needs of others to determine the character of their service or devour their selfhood. Weakness of ego does not seem at all characteristic of Jesus, Peter, and Paul. Their subordination to others was selective; it was acted out in such a way as to help their neighbors receive the gospel and taste the power of the Spirit (1 Cor 2:1-5; 2 Cor 11:7-10, 20f.).

III

But if this picture of servanthood is accurate, then we may expect New Testament leadership to be greatly dependent upon special gifts of discernment and boldness. And that, I think, is exactly what the relevant texts indicate. Discernment appears only once and boldness not at all in the various epistolary lists of charismatic gifts (see “discernment of spirits” in 1 Cor 12:10); but from a phenomenological point of view these two qualities of ministry are in fact the ones that turn up most frequently in New Testament references to leadership. They also tend to overlap, but for purposes of clarity we shall treat them separately in this essay.

Discernment in the New Testament sense may be understood as a Spirit-led perception of God’s presence and saving work (or its opposite). Paul and the

⁶John N. Collins argues convincingly that for the NT writers table service is a derived meaning within the *diakon*- word group. The basic meaning has to do with fulfilling a commission given by a higher (often divine) authority. See *Diakonia: Reinterpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University, 1990) esp. 245-263.

⁷See S. Scott Bartchy, “Slavery (Greco-Roman)” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 6.67.

author of 1 John emphasize that it is to be practiced by all believers (1 Cor 11:27-29; Rom 12:2), especially in connection with the evaluating of prophetic utterances (1 Cor 14:29; 1 Thess 5:20f.; 1 John 4:1). But a survey of stories about apostolic leaders reveals that in their case discernment becomes the very hallmark of their activity. Among the twelve disciples Peter alone sees deeply enough into Jesus’ earthly ministry to name him as the Messiah (Mark 8:29). Likewise, the Samaritan woman perceives something of Jesus’ divine vocation (John 4:19, 29) and goes to tell her neighbors. Mary Magdalene, as first witness to the Risen One, recognizes him when he speaks her name (John 20:16). The Beloved Disciple cries out “It is the Lord!” when his fellow disciples see only a stranger (John 21:17). At Pentecost it is Peter who grasps the meaning of the confusion and remembers a text from Joel that enables him to explain the Spirit’s advent to the crowd (Acts 2:1-21). Later, at the apostolic council, James performs a similar task of discernment followed by scriptural confirmation (15:13-21). But the events interpreted by James are themselves a narrative originating with Peter in which the apostle’s change of mind regarding the inclusion of gentiles is guided by the Holy Spirit (10:19f., 28, 34, 47f.; 11:12, 17). In each of these accounts the perception of one individual is followed by an announcement of God’s presence and work to a group. Leaders lead by taking the hermeneutical initiative.

In a passage not often noticed by students of leadership, Paul reflects on his special calling to interpret the gifts of God to his congregations:

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age.... We [believers] have received not the spirit of the world but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God—which things we [apostles] indeed speak about not with words taught from human wisdom but with those taught from the Spirit, as we interpret spiritual gifts to spiritual people. Left to their own devices, humans do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them and they are not capable of

understanding them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor 2:6, 12-14; my translation)⁸

Here it is clear that Paul sees his role as discerner and interpreter to be a chief feature of his ministry. Throughout his letters this self-definition is borne out by his apostolic practice (see esp. Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12-14).

In tandem with discernment comes boldness. The word most often translated “boldness” in our modern English versions of the Bible is the Greek *parresia*, which also denotes courage and confidence, especially in the public arena. The verb *parresiazomai* means to speak freely, openly, or fearlessly. Again, while all believers are thought to enjoy this quality of life in Christ—particularly toward God, when they pray (Eph 3:12; Heb 4:16; 1 John 5:14)—it is the leaders who manifest *parresia* most fully. At Pentecost Peter speaks “confidently” to the crowd (Acts 2:29). Soon afterward, he and John proclaim Jesus in the temple, and the religious officials

⁸See the exegetical grounding for this translation in my essay “From Mystery to Ministry: Paul as Interpreter of Charismatic Gifts,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 33 (1978) 168f.

express astonishment at their boldness because they are “uneducated and ordinary men” (4:13).

The two disciples are arrested and commanded not to speak or teach in Jesus’ name. But upon their release the very first thing they do is to pray with other members of their community for renewed boldness to speak the word. Immediately, Luke reports, “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness” (4:23-31). At the very end of Acts, Luke offers this description of Paul’s daily activity during his house arrest in Rome: “He...welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus with all boldness” (28:30f.). In the last decades of the first century, it seems, the word *parresia* has become almost a technical term in some circles for the public statement of the gospel by church leaders.⁹ We may imagine that it was just such a boldness that enabled women leaders to speak out in the church, contrary to the cultural expectations and controls of their day.

Paul calls attention to his own boldness of speech for Christ during an imprisonment (Phil 1:20) and to his “great boldness in Christ to command,” a feature of his apostolic authority that he chooses not to use with Philemon (Phmn 8). In Ephesians the Pauline author asks, precisely as a leader, that his addressees will intercede on his behalf so that he can proclaim the mystery of the gospel with boldness (“Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak”—Eph 6:19f.). Finally, in 1 Tim 3:13, boldness is understood more as a reward than as a gift (“those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith”) but specifically as a mark of church leaders.

IV

Our initial definition of leaders in the New Testament, offered as a heuristic aid, appears to be substantiated by the textual evidence. Leaders are those led into prominence as servants of Christ and endowed with special gifts of discernment and boldness. In introducing this definition, we suggested that the term “non-hierarchical” does not quite work as a characterization of New Testament leadership. We are now in a position to elaborate a little on that view. New Testament leaders do fit into the category of the hierarchical in the sense that they regularly initiate and

oversee activity within the church. But they exercise their authority primarily through gifts conferred and employed in their role as servants. The offices of New Testament leaders are determined chiefly by charisma. This means that the real *archē* or rule in the church does not belong to humans but to God in Christ. God rules through the gifts; and therefore they are constantly in flux. “All these [gifts] are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually as the Spirit wills” (1 Cor 12:11; each of the verb tenses is present, indicating an ongoing event). New Testament leaders wield power, but it is never quite their own. It is the

⁹In Acts, the verb *parresiazomai* is applied only to Paul, Barnabas, and Apollos, and only in connection with their preaching.

page 33

power of God for salvation, manifested by the Spirit in gifts and fruit among all believers.

One can speak appropriately of an inequality in gifts and even of certain privileges that are accorded to New Testament leaders. But these are never permanent; nor are they sanctioned by physical force or the weight of an established power structure. The power of the Holy Spirit always issues, ultimately, in the felt love of God, poured out like cleansing and refreshing water in human hearts (Rom 5:5). Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (2 Cor 3:17). It is this Spirit who leads New Testament leaders, this Spirit who guides their discernment and emboldens them for action. Yes, there are identifiable rankings among New Testament believers, but they are complex and subject to almost instantaneous change (e.g., through prophecy). Moreover, these echelons are numerous—note the proliferation of offices and new ministries during the apostolic period—and the space between them is small. Indeed, God is constantly at work raising up those who are identified as lesser folk by the standards of the world (1 Cor 1:26-31; 12:21-26). At the center of this creative flow stands the crucified and risen Christ.

All true hierarchies develop in line with his holy rule for the progress of the gospel. All true hierarchies are transfigured by his presence. Here is a pointed message from the first-century church to the church of the waning twentieth.