

POWER STRUCTURE IN THE CONFIGURATION
OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

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Abstract

Leadership structures in religious communities are varied in accordance with differences in ecclesiastical views of church polity. The traditional views of church government, episcopal, Presbyterian, or congregational continue to exist, but modern forms include the single pastor-led church, democratic congregational-led churches, or forms of plural leadership. While leadership structure in a religious community may vary it must be conceded that each of the different models work given the right conditions and for that reason they continue to exist. This is true of churches and businesses, and a discussion of which form works best is the purview of leadership studies. This paper hypothesizes that the concept of *servant leadership* as a characteristic of leadership is unique in that it is culturally oxymoronic. The power of the servant leader is amplified by its very nature of standing out in contrast to how humans typically view power – and this contrast engages the human heart into becoming willing followers in a relationship with that special meaning of “being different from all the rest”.

Power Structure in the Configuration of Servant Leadership

Leadership as a subset of organizational studies is characterized in terms of style, traits, behaviors, and roles and like all great theories is a complex subject that genders years of research, discussion, and debate. Leadership theories and organizational theories can seldom be discussed as separate issues because organizations entail vertical and horizontal relationships, and as much as anything else, leadership is about relationship. The structures of organizations often mirror the style of the leaders. Formal organization may have a strong hierarchical structure, and this suggest that the structure was put in place and is maintained by leaders that also perceive leadership in terms of hierarchy. Organizations can also be informal which fosters a more cooperative style of relationship such as social networks or communities of common interest, and these also reflect perceptions of leadership styles. This suggests that there is a correlation between how leadership develops and how organizations develop as a result of forms of leadership.

Williams (2012) writes, “Organizational structure is the vertical and horizontal configuration of departments, authority, and jobs with a company”.¹ It refers to how relationships are structured, how authority is distributed, and how work gets accomplished. Marak (1964) notes leadership structure refers both to relationship and to an authority-compliance configuration that defines the nature of the relationship. Marak writes, “The development of a leadership structure – an asymmetry in the relative frequencies of control and compliance acts initiated and received by the members of a group – depends upon a situation in which one person has more power than another”.² The structural configuration, whether vertical

¹ Williams, Chuck. *Effective Management*. 5th ed. Mason, OH: South-Western Cengage, 2012, p. 250.

² Marak Jr, George E. "The Evolution of Leadership Structure." *Sociometry* 27, no. 2 (1964), p. 175.

or horizontal, weak or strong, close or distant can say a lot about the dynamics of the relationship.

Marak (1964) notes “Possessions, personality, and position in a social structure are interrelated variables that influence the evolution of control-compliance interaction patterns”.³ This telling comment reveals a great deal about the nature and purpose of power. Why does anyone want to be a leader? This begs the question as to whether leadership equates to power or authority – and does power infer the promise of reward, as in greater position or more possessions? Typically the concept of leadership is enthroned in the notion of status, position, or other personal benefit. It is a given that “team-leaders” at a fast food restaurant receive a wage increase when promoted even if it only means a quarter an hour difference. Middle managers have compensating rewards, and top managers are endowed with even greater rewards. The conceptualization of what leaders do and what leaders are have a cultural perspective associated with power and rewards that distort the real understanding of leadership.

Structural configurations of power

The uncomfortable truth is that power, position, and possessions are interrelated factors in human social context. Note the change from Marak’s triad of social structure variables, where we substitute “power” for personality in a discussion of the real world configurations for which we are culturally familiar. Social structures are relevant to multi-disciplinary studies of sociology, psychology, organizational theory, natural sciences, and even theology. In general any subject dealing with how things relate to one another must consider structural configurations. Structural configurations suggest *position* in the configuration, and how things are positioned

³ Ibid.

suggest ways that we can discuss elements of power, control, status, or influence. These are elements of elite circles of influence that for many say “I have arrived” or that are associated with notions of achievement. Dogan (2003) in the book *Introduction: Diversity of Elite Configurations and Clusters of Power* write,

The notion of configuration which appears in the title of this book has the same meaning as in astronomy: the position of planetary corps in relation to one another. In elite studies, configuration means the relative position and size of various elite circles (political, bureaucratic, capitalist, managerial, cultural, religious, military, etc.) in the constellation of power.⁴

Elitism entails symbols that become expectations in terms of cultural power distance. The term power distance “refers to the extent to which the members of a culture are willing to accept an unequal distribution of power, wealth, and prestige”.⁵ Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) note that high power distance cultures like Brazil, Singapore, or Arabic countries rely heavily on hierarchy in their power structures.⁶ High power distance is structured vertically with more power at the top where subordinates expect to be told what to do. Low power distance cultures are more democratic, and imply a horizontal distribution of power which is shared between managers and subordinates. Hatch and Cunliffe note, “As a consequence of these contradictory expectations, the ideal boss in a low power distance culture is a resourceful democrat, whereas in a high power distance culture the best boss is a benevolent autocrat”.⁷

⁴ Dogan, Mattei. "Introduction: Diversity of Elite Configurations and Clusters of Power." *Comparative Sociology* 2, no. 1 (2003): p1.

⁵ Hatch, Mary Jo, and Ann L. Cunliffe. *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives*. 2nd ed. Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006. 1997, p. 181.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, p. 183.

Clearly power relationships are culturally relevant, normal, and necessary. The whole notion of “law” is based on relationships of power and authority. Without law, there is no order and anarchy suggests the breaking down of power structures that are intended to provide safety and harmony to social structures. The etymology of the word “power” from the Anglo-French *pouair* and the Latin *potis* defines power as “ability, ability to act or do; strength, vigor, might, efficacy, control, mastery, dominion, authority”⁸, many synonyms that can have very positive meanings associated with accomplishment and achievement. Power however is a two edged sword either to be feared or revered, not for the fact of its existence, but only because of its consequences. A well-known quotation by Baron John Acton states, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men”.⁹

On the other hand, the apostle Paul declares power, as a role of government, is not to be feared but to be respected. Paul writes,

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same.¹⁰

What is disputed is whether the symbols most associated with power, position and possessions, are necessary to power. If power tends to corrupt, according to Lord Acton, does this mean that the power itself is of a corrupting nature? This would certainly not be the view of Paul nor as we

⁸ Power: Online Etymology Dictionary <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=power>

⁹ Lord Aston: The Phrase Finder: <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/absolute-power-corrupts-absolutely.html>

¹⁰ Romans 13: 1-3, KJV.

shall see is it a Biblical view from understanding the many scriptures that elevate power as characterized by “ability”, for example, “And when he had called unto *him* his twelve disciples, he gave them power *against* unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease.”¹¹

We hypothesize that it is not power that corrupts, but rather position and possessions that corrupt those that have power. Power without love is the most dangerous form of power, and since love, other than for self, suggests the opposite of self-interest, power that is non-corrupting can only be power not driven by self-interest.

Leadership versus power

It is important to distinguish between power and leadership. The term power refers to authority and control – leadership refers to influence, and although this is a form of power does not necessarily result from authority or control. The earlier mention of distortion concerning leadership is significant because there is a tendency in human nature to look to positional power for leadership and this is the root cause of “the blind leading the blind”¹² syndrome. The corporate struggle for position on the ladder of success often equates to the part of the triad in our discussion, *possessions*, but is also about a desire for positional power. Real leadership, however, is not bound by position or possessions, but has influence as its own form of power.

Influence can come from beneath one’s own status and gives rise to the concept of servant leaders. Every teacher, manager, parent, or governor is wise to listen to those who have subordinate roles. The reality is that *influence* is a powerful two-way street that “leads” others to

¹¹ Matthew 10:1, KJV.

¹² Matthew 15:14, KJV.

action, whether good or bad. Because leaders do for the most part excel to positions of power it is normal to view leadership equating to power in relationship. The nuance of difference is that leadership in the context of influence suggests that it has more to do with the *power of personality and influence*, while concepts of control are based on the powers of *position and possessions*, for example the “power of the purse”. The characterization of servant leader implies that position, possessions, and status are not what make the servant leader. The servant leader can influence from roles suggested by subordinates, a student, a child, a subordinate worker, or one who is governed – meaning the obedient servant of another. The servant leader uses a frame of mind for him or her-self and a frame of reference in the eyes of the subordinate that whatever influences the leader has, it is for the benefit of the subordinate, not the leader.

The Earliest Power Structure: A Textual Analysis

A discussion of servant leadership often includes the Matthew 20:25-27 pericope in which Jesus states to his disciple,

But Jesus called them *unto him*, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.

However the concept of power structures began in Genesis 2 in the creation story. Leadership, authority, control, prestige, and power are normal elements in structures of relationship. There are few if any structures that can claim complete equality for all members, and it is the concept of equality that creates the tension that exists in any power relationship.

Here is an opportunity to create a veritable firestorm by stating that “equality issues” are dangerous grounds for our discussion because we posit that Biblical text does not suggest total gender equality in male – female relationships, specifically in the context of marriage. Nor does it prohibit equality in many areas of life. Power and equality can never be taken in concepts of totality with the exception of only one omnipotent being, God, who has *all power*, and nothing is equal to Him. All issues of power and equality must be in the context of their structural determinations. To reiterate – the nature of the structure and the nature of the relationships in the structure determine the types, the limits, and the distributions of power.

Obviously the question concerns equal in what way or not equal in what way. Semantic issues require exegetical and textual analysis to “rightly divide the word of truth” in matters of gender relationships. The relationship between husband and wife which is the first Biblical reference for *power relationships* is from Genesis which reads, “Then he (sic God) said to the woman, “I will sharpen the pain of your pregnancy, and in pain you will give birth. And you will desire to control your husband, but he will rule over you.”¹³

Prior to this pronouncement as the result of the fall of man, we shall consider an earlier Biblical text which in our English language suggests a structural configuration that appears to be vertical in nature in that the term “helper” refers to an assistant or attendant. The pericope in Genesis states, “Then the Lord God said it was not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him”.¹⁴ McGlone (1989) notes, “The word translated ‘helper’ is

¹³ Genesis 3:16, NLT.

¹⁴ Genesis 2:18, NLT.

literally “one corresponding to him.”¹⁵ The exegesis should consider two questions about the original context of the power relationship.

The first question is does the texts support a vertical structure by using the word “helper”. The context that follows states, “And Adam said, ‘This *is* now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.”¹⁶ The emphatic statement of relationship in that the woman and the man are “one flesh” does not suggest two existing in relationship side by side but rather two becoming one being that “makes or completes” the whole man. This is in keeping with the very definition of woman – “taken out of man”. The marriage relationship was a restorative function – the inference of one flesh meaning completion. In the sense of being “one”, the relationship of two was replaced by the completeness of one which in effect removes the structure of two, and hence any power relationship.

Viewed from a structure of “one” there would exist no power structure. Term “equal” is not relevant when one can equal nothing else but one. We interject that “equal” refers to a concept in which there are two or more elements. It is easy to understand why God states, “To whom then will you liken me, or shall I be equal”¹⁷, or “To whom will you compare me, who is my equal.”¹⁸ The fact that there is only one God means there is no equal and equality is a moot point. In creation, when God makes man and woman “one flesh” he removes the structure of two and any semblance of power structure.

¹⁵ Lee McGlone. Genesis 2:18-24; Ephesians 5:21-6:9. *Review and expositor*, 86, (1989), p. 244.

¹⁶ Genesis 2:21, KJV.

¹⁷ Isaiah 40:25, KJV.

¹⁸ Isaiah 46:5, KJV.

The second question in the analysis is if man and woman are “one” in the original meaning, therefore without a power relationship, where do we then find the suggestion of man’s power over the woman. The answer is in the pronouncement of Genesis 3, after the fall, and as a result of sin that not only changed the nature of man’s oneness with God, but man’s nature of oneness with his wife. Sin created the divides that made structural changes between God, man, and woman. Sin necessitated the need for power structures that resulted in “law” for the God and man structure, and “headship” or covering in the man and woman structure. The concept of headship as a power structure is covered by Paul in I Corinthians 11 (man and woman)¹⁹ and in Ephesians²⁰ and Colossians²¹ (Christ and the church).

The notion of equality implies a state where authority or power does not exist between equal members and the Bible text does not preclude gender equality in most areas of life. This is the reason for the confusion that gave rise to feminist theology. What is most often missed in the discussion of power is that the *nature of the relationship determines the extent, purpose, and constructs of the power in the relationship* and the Genesis 3:16 pericope must be taken in the context of what happened in the fall of man that precipitated the power structure. The woman was deceived by Satan, ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and enticed her husband to do the same. The resulting spiritual condition caused God to create spiritual authority, power, or control for the purposes of protection.

Note Paul’s explanation for the power structure in the I Corinthians 11 pericope concerning headship. “For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the

¹⁹ I Corinthians 11:1-13

²⁰ Ephesians 1:22, 4:15, 5:23

²¹ Colossians 1:18, 2:10, 2:19

angels”.²² Paul writes, “And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.”²³ The nature of the woman is to be more spiritually sensitive than a man. It is not uncommon for women and children to often make up the greater portion of church congregations. The woman’s spiritual sensitivity is a positive in relationship to God, but as a negative enhances her vulnerability to Satan’s attack. For this reason, man’s rule over the woman from the Genesis 3:16 pericope is seen by Paul in the context of spiritual warfare. It is not seen in the context of domination over other areas of her life.

Only God has all power; for the rest of us power is intended to have boundaries and limits. In a husband-wife relationship for example, God gave man the power to protect his wife, but not the power to prevent his wife from being successful in business. One only has to read a few scriptures to understand that women may have financial privileges. Solomon writes,

Who can find a virtuous and capable wife? She is more precious than rubies. Her husband can trust her, and she will greatly enrich his life. She brings him good not harm, all the days of her life. She finds wool and flax and busily spins it. She is like a merchant’s ship, bringing her food from afar. She gets up before dawn to prepare breakfast for her household and plan the day’s work for her servant girls. She goes to inspect a field and buys it; with her earnings she plants a vineyard. She is energetic and strong, a hard worker. She makes sure her dealings are profitable; her lamp burns late into the night.²⁴

Here the woman is described as being capable, involved in business, and making “sure her dealings are profitable”.

²² I Corinthians 11:10

²³ I Timothy 2:14

²⁴ Proverbs 31:10-18, NLT.

A second scripture, speaks of the women that were disciples of Jesus who supported him. “Among them were Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons; Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s business manager; Susanna; and many others who were contributing their own resources to support Jesus and his disciples.”²⁵ The “many others” could suggest that this included men, but it is evident by the mention of the women, there was parity for women in the social structure during the time of Jesus.

The danger of feminist theology is that if the relationship was created where the power element was intended for safety, security, and order – equality in essence removes the power, thus removing the safety that was intended. We posit that safety, security, and order are the purposes for the Genesis 3 power relationship, that is was specific to the marriage relationship, and that other elements often associated with power, namely possessions, positions outside of marriage, wealth, or prestige are not included by God in the power structure envisioned in Genesis 3.

Unfortunately, the feminist view of the Genesis 3 pericope about the creation of man and woman misses entirely the power elements being discussed in the pericope, and it takes analysis of several texts written by Apostle Paul to have a better understanding of the power relationship between man and woman that was intended by God. The fact that feminist have missed the point of the Genesis pericope has opened up the dangers of feminist theology discussed later. In the context of the Genesis 2 and 3 pericope, we will confine the discussion to suggesting the following hypotheses:

²⁵ Luke 8: 2-3, NLT.

1. Not all structural relations are power relationships. In terms of power the notion of horizontal relationship conceptualizes the absence of power between horizontal members. Note *this does not conceptualize absence of influence* if we are discussing power in reference to authority and control.
2. If the structural relationship includes a power relationship element, shifting to equality changes the structure, and cancels the purpose of the power element.
3. If the elements of power and control are intended to provide safety and security, equality removes the power mechanisms that provided safety and security.

What must be considered in the discussion is that power as a two edged sword in all cultures where on the one hand power increases wealth and prestige for the powerful and is often used to inhibit or at least controls wealth and prestige for others. This is positive for those in power and negative for those subject to power. At the same time power is used in maintaining order, which is reflected in matters of safety and security, this being a positive use of power.

Power therefore can be viewed both positively and negatively and is the most central element of any conflict. When God created the relationship between man and woman, God also created positional power that has been maligned, misinterpreted, and has gendered some of the greatest debates about the nature of power and control. The issue of gender equality is of such significance that it has sparked a world-wide conflagration that has fanned the flames of social engineering, women's rights, and yes – gay rights. Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) observe,

A number of feminist scholars have argued that this separation of male and female domains and practices reinforces a binary view of gender that underpins the everyday

actions and interactions of both men and women, thus reproducing traditional relations of domination and subordination.²⁶

To the feminist male and female relationships, particularly traditional view of the relationship is all about power and domination. DeSilva (2004) notes, “Basic to feminist criticism is a rejection of patriarchy – an ideology in which men and the male agenda are privileged and empowered, while women and the female agenda are relegated to ancillary roles.”²⁷ The tragedy is the extent to which the ideology has created its own form of abuse by destroying the first and most primary of man’s relationships.

Servant Leadership: The Perception of Equality

The assumption of all things being equal in any team sport is a myth, considering that differences in contribution usually result in differences in reward – even if is limited to who gets the most media attention. It may be possible to design a relationship around equal authority, but it is unlikely that members of any relationship have equal influence. Leaders stand out from the rest which is why influence develops. Leaders may not always have the best ideas, for others in an organizational structure also have ideas – but these often go unnoticed. At times those with positional power have less influence – a fact that has a way of creating tension for managers – because leadership again is not about position. The unique characteristic of servant leadership is that is reframes the debate about power, control, and equality. Servant leadership is an exercise

²⁶ Hatch, *ibid.* p. 273

²⁷ DeSilva, David A. *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods, & Ministry Formation*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2004, p. 757.

of influence which has the ability to work as other forms of power, but does so by providing the perception of equality.

The tension between power relationships and issues of equality is a major source of conflict, not only in the gender battles, but in issues of race, economics, class warfare, and styles of government. The immortal declaration, “All men are created equal” is enthroned in the United States Declaration of Independence. What has been called a self-evident truth is true in the sense that in the eyes of the creator equality exist. Paul writes, “In this new life, it doesn’t matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.”²⁸ All of humanity exists in one horizontal relationship with one another but under One God who has utmost power over us all. What is also true is that equality is the basic desire of the heart and that is why it serves as the expression of the principle that has attracted the millions that have come to America seeking freedom.

However, equality and freedom are seen as natural enemies and is a main point of disagreement between libertarians and egalitarians.²⁹ Vorster (2010) writes, “In capitalist economies that allow citizens the freedom to dispose of their wealth in a manner they think fit, distributions are often extremely unequal. Equalitarian economies, on the other hand, frequently degenerate into oppression or into the equal distribution of poverty.”³⁰ The reason that equality and freedom are natural enemies is not however because they are opposite in nature. Equality in the minds of most means the freedom to be treated the same, and in the Declaration of

²⁸ Colossians 3:11, NLT.

²⁹ Vorster, Nico. "Are Freedom and Equality Natural Enemies? A Christian-Theological Perspective." *Heythrop Journal* 51, no. 4 (2010): 594-609, p. 594.

³⁰ Ibid.

Independence the linguistic context suggests that meaning. But if everyone in a communistic society is equally poor, is that the kind of freedom one expects?

In the realm of social organizations, all men are not equal, nor will they ever be. To suggest otherwise is dare we say it, to exhibit the height of ignorance. A world without power structures is untenable and even in the utopian state of Jesus ruling the earth we are told, “Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. For them the second death holds no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him a thousand years.”³¹ Vorster (2010) observes,

Equality is not part of the created structure of the human being – as is the case with freedom – because all people are not created with the same talents and abilities. All inequalities are therefore not necessarily unjust. The fallacy of extreme egalitarianism lies therein that it confuses equality with sameness, and tries to minimize individual differences by enforcing similarities upon people. Sameness and enforced homogeneity contradict the diversity of creation.³²

Relationship in any social structure can never be about complete equality, complete sameness, or even sameness in influence. People are simply different even when a lack of similarity is miniscule.

Servant leadership does not remove power, it does not make everyone equal, and it does not assure that everyone will be treated the same. What servant leadership does is lead from the *perspective of equality and sameness* by imposing on ones-self the empathy that taps into the

³¹ Revelation 20:6

³² Vorster, *ibid.* p. 601

heartfelt desire of the subordinate to be an equal with the leader. Such is the case in the Matthew 20 pericope where we have what has become known as the Lord's expression of servant leadership.

Summary

When the mother of James and John asked Jesus "Let my two sons sit in places of honor next to you, one on your right and one on your left"³³ she could have been requesting status, but having been a disciple of Jesus herself, she knew that Jesus was not all about power, prestige, or wealth. Jesus was the model servant leader, and he stated this to be truth – "For even the son of man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life a ransom for others".³⁴ Jesus's reply was not a rebuke to the wife of Zebedee, but was in the form of a clarification.

Servant leadership is primarily about attitudes and perceptions, because servant leaders are so often bosses, managers, and wielders of power as well as of influence. Boone and Makhani (2012) describe five necessary attitudes of a servant leader.³⁵ Servant leaders "institutionalize the virtue of serving others first, not serving oneself."³⁶ This demonstrates the *purpose of the relationship* between the leaders and subordinate. Secondly, "He observes that we add value to others when we know and relate to what others value".³⁷ This demonstrates the *potential of the relationship*. Thirdly, "Effective servant leaders share a common attitude that 'everyone is great at something' and it is their responsibility to help followers realize how they can apply whatever special talent(s) they can offer toward achievement of the organization's

³³ Matthew 20: 21, NLT.

³⁴ Ibid v. 28

³⁵ Boone, Larry W., and Sanya Makhani. "Five Necessary Attitudes of a Servant Leader." *Review of Business* 33, no. 1 (Winter2012/2013 2012): 83-96.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 87

³⁷ Ibid. p. 89

vision.”³⁸ This demonstrates the *perspective of the relationship*. Fourth, “Leaders accept and act on the paradox of power: you become more powerful when you give your own power away”.³⁹ This is the *paradox of servant leadership*. Last of all, “Servant leaders recognize that their success derives from the attitude that they are leading an organizational effort to develop a productive community”.⁴⁰ This is the end *product* of a servant leader relationship.

The nature of servant leadership requires that leadership studies create a paradigm shift in the minds of young men and women that are plagued with notions of success that focus on wealth, prestige, and status. That too is the oxymoronic problem that faces educators because higher education and success is framed in social status symbols. Discussions must include more important values about why one wants to leads, and the answer should reflect on how organizations chose future leaders.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 90

³⁹ Ibid.p.92

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 93