

Embracing Shared Ministry

EMBRACING SHARED MINISTRY

POWER *and* STATUS *in the* EARLY CHURCH
and WHY IT MATTERS TODAY

Joseph H. Hellerman

 Kregel
Ministry

Embracing Shared Ministry: Power and Status in the Early Church and Why It Matters Today

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To Brandon,
Ed,
Carlos,
Dan,
Denny,
John,
Michael,
and Stan,
my fellow pastor-elders
of Oceanside Christian Fellowship

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ABBREVIATIONS

Periodicals and Reference Works

ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library</i>
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
CIL	<i>Corpus inscriptionum latinarum</i>
ILS	<i>Inscriptiones latinae selectae</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
SIG	<i>Sylloge inscriptionum graecarum</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
WUNT	<i>Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament</i>

Greek and Latin Authors

Appian	
<i>BCiv.</i>	<i>The Civil Wars</i>
Apuleius	
<i>Met.</i>	<i>Metamorphoses (a.k.a. The Golden Ass)</i>
Cicero	
<i>Fam.</i>	<i>Epistulae ad Familiares (Letters to Friends)</i>
<i>Tusc.</i>	<i>Tusculan Disputations</i>
<i>2 Verr.</i>	<i>Against Verres, Part Two</i>
Dio Chrysostom	
<i>Or.</i>	<i>Orations</i>

Eusebius

Hist. eccl. *Historia ecclesiastica*

Marcus Cornelius Fronto

Ad Pium *Ad Antoninum Pium*

Philo

Leg. *De Legatione ad Gaium (On the Embassy to Gaius)*

Plautus

Bacch. *Bacchides (The Two Bacchises)*

Mil. Glor. *Miles Gloriosus (The Braggart Warrior)*

Pliny the Younger

Ep. *Epistulae (Letters)*

Plutarch

Brut. *Brutus*

Crass. *Crassus*

Pomp. *Pompey*

Porphyry

Abst. *De abstentia*

Suetonius

Aug. *The Deified Augustus*

Claud. *The Deified Claudius*

Symmachus

Ep. *Epistulae (Letters)*

Tacitus

Ann. *The Annals*

Charting Our Course Together

Many local church ministers are emotionally well-balanced Christian leaders with the purest of motives—persons who consistently exercise their pastoral authority in encouraging and nurturing ways.

This book is about those who are not.

Embracing Shared Ministry finds its conceptual origins in an academic monograph published in 2005.¹ I sought to demonstrate that Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, intentionally subverts the social values of the dominant culture in the Roman colony at Philippi in order to create a radically different relational environment among the Philippian Christians.

Surviving archaeological evidence from the site portrays Roman elites and non-elites alike using their financial resources and social capital in the service of their own personal and familial agendas. Paul, in stark contrast, shows Jesus using his status and authority solely in the service of others (Phil 2:6–11).

The grand narrative of Christ’s humiliation and exaltation came alive for me anew when I recognized that Paul’s designs in the passage were not primarily christological. They were ecclesiological. Or, perhaps more accurately, what we have in Philippians 2:6–11 is Christology in the service of an overarching ecclesiological agenda.

1. Joseph H. Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi: Carmen Christi as Cursus Pudorum*, SNTSMS 132 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Accordingly, Paul's primary point in verse 6 is not that Christ was somehow ontologically "God" before the incarnation, though one can certainly find ample support in the text for the doctrine of the deity of Christ.

Paul's aim, rather, is to inform his readers that Christ enjoyed "equality with God" with respect to power and status. And it is Christ's attitude toward his privileged position that Paul draws upon in the text to encourage the Philippians—particularly those church members with status and social privilege—to act similarly in their mutual relations in the Jesus community in the colony (v. 5).

Until the fall of 2009, I was content to allow my research on Paul and Roman Philippi to remain in an academic format, leaving it to others, perhaps, to draw upon the findings and contextualize them for broader reading audiences. God used the first semester of the 2009–10 academic year to change my mind.

A World of Hurt

I had come off a much needed spring sabbatical at Talbot School of Theology and was teaching a full load and preaching every Sunday at church. One of my classes that semester was an elective in ecclesiology, titled *The Church as Family*.

The goal for the course is a simple one: to challenge students to exchange the institutional view of church that many had brought with them to seminary for a markedly relational—and much more biblical—perspective on Christian community and pastoral ministry.

Course materials that semester stirred up an inordinate amount of hurt and heartache among my students. I had numbers of them in my office detailing incidents of abuse they had experienced at the hands of pastors and other authority figures in their churches.

Some of these students were in associate staff positions. Others were volunteers. Still others had seen family members manipulated and mistreated by persons in authority in their home churches.

I found myself doing damage control in the lives of students throughout the semester. It became painfully apparent that the pastors in these churches were not using their authority in the service of others, after the example of Jesus in Philippians 2.

The narratives were in some ways quite distinct. Asian students ran headlong into a highly stratified honor culture that facilitates the misuse of power by older persons in positions of leadership. The authority of these Korean senior pastors typically cannot be challenged by the younger leaders and church members under their charge.

Students in large Anglo churches struggled with a corporate mentality that views the senior pastor as a CEO and his associate staff as employees. Add an emotionally dysfunctional senior pastor to the mix in either cultural setting and the result is a recipe for relational disaster.

Different cultures. Different stories. The same results: egregious mistreatment of junior staff and parishioners by pastors who ought to know—and do—better.

Janice's Story

One interaction, in particular, caught me quite off guard. The graduate course described above is a demanding one. A student I will call Janice rose to the occasion.

I had taught Janice second-year Greek while she was an undergraduate Bible major at Biola University, and I was not surprised that she was doing well in seminary. Janice's written responses to the required readings, as well as the questions she raised in class, were consistently incisive and thought-provoking for her professor and fellow students alike. I sensed that God was going to use this young woman in some mighty ways in his kingdom plan.

One day Janice stayed around after class to ask a question: *What do you say to someone who is cynical about church and who doesn't have much hope that the things we are learning about the church as a family could ever really happen?*

Now I naively assumed that Janice was talking about someone

else—a friend, perhaps, or a fellow student who harbored negative feelings towards institutional Christianity. So I proceeded to respond accordingly.

It soon became clear that I had completely misinterpreted the question. Janice’s inquiry was not about a friend or fellow student. Janice was describing herself. Janice was the one who was “cynical about church.” It was Janice who seriously wondered whether “church as a family could ever really happen.”

To my surprise and dismay I discovered that this brilliant, God-loving Bible student was just about ready to give up on the local church, and understandably so, given her personal pilgrimage in the body of Christ.

During her formative years as a high-schooler and young adult, Janice had experienced the heartache of a church split. The months that followed saw Janice’s congregation bearing the brunt of highly dysfunctional leadership under the authority of a heavy-handed senior pastor. Janice’s father, an elder in the church, was caught in the middle throughout.

By the time she arrived in class in September 2009, the abuse of spiritual authority had taken its toll on Janice, the members of her immediate family, and numbers of persons in her church. Little wonder that Janice was more than a bit skeptical toward her professor’s convictions that the church ought to function—and really could function—as a healthy surrogate family.

As that fall semester unfolded it became increasingly clear that what we know about Paul, the social world of Roman Philippi, and Paul’s letter to the Philippians has a timely message for contemporary church leaders. In the chapters to follow, I hope to demonstrate that Paul’s cruciform vision for authentic spiritual leadership—epitomized in the humiliation and exaltation of Christ in Philippians 2—has much to say to pastors and others in positions of authority in our churches in America today.

Below is an outline of the book. But first a word about a word: “cruciform.”

The term surfaced some time ago, in academic circles, as a catchword for Paul’s other-centered approach to Christian life

and ministry. “Cruciform” literally means “in the shape of the cross.”

Now most academic jargon is better left in the ivory tower, in articles and books written *by* biblical scholars *for* biblical scholars. “Cruciform,” however, is a word we should co-opt for popular consumption. Why? Because, properly understood, “cruciform” communicates so very much that is at the heart of the gospel.

The cross of Christ is all about self-denial, sacrifice, living and dying in the service of others: “If anyone wants to be My follower, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me” (Mark 8:34). The Christian life, at its essence, is a cruciform life. It is a life that is shaped like—and shaped by—the cross of Jesus Christ. To genuinely know Christ is to be “conformed to His death” (Phil 3:10).

This is especially the case where the use of spiritual power and authority is concerned. Biblical leadership is other-centered leadership—leadership in the shape of the cross. So you can expect to encounter the word *cruciform* quite often in the pages that follow, since it so nicely summarizes Paul’s radically countercultural approach to Christian ministry and leadership.

A Road Map for the Chapters to Follow

The book consists of three parts. Part 1 (Power and Authority in the Roman World: The Social Context of the Pauline Mission) outlines the socio-cultural setting of Roman Philippi. This background information sets the stage for our encounter with Paul’s markedly alternative vision for leadership in the biblical materials.

Part 2 (Power and Authority in the Early Church: Paul’s Cruciform Vision for Authentic Christian Leadership) interprets Paul’s letter to the Philippians, and the apostle’s ministry in Philippi, as related by Luke in Acts 16, against the background of Roman social values and behaviors. We will seek to craft a biblical theology of leadership and community that will equip us to address issues of power and authority in our churches today.

An important heads-up: The biblical and historical materials in parts 1 and 2 require serious reflection about a world much

different from our own. There are no simple, user-friendly solutions to the unhealthy exercise of authority that plagues so many congregations today. Contemporary sociological and psychological analyses and prescriptions are helpful, but they are not, in the final analysis, fully satisfying.

What is needed is a solid biblical foundation upon which to build a philosophy of ministry that contrasts sharply with the regrettable scenarios of power abuse that play themselves out in our churches. Such an approach necessitates, in turn, thoughtful engagement with the biblical texts in their original socio-cultural settings.

Part 3 (Power and Authority in the Church Today: Cultivating a Social Context for Servant Leadership) concludes the book. Here we consider the implications of Paul's ecclesiology for the exercise of authority by church leaders today.

It is common in evangelical circles for us to encourage one another to respect and submit to the authority figures in our lives. There is, of course, good biblical warrant for doing so. After all, the Christian life finds its beginnings in our submission to the will of our Creator and Redeemer, as we individually and corporately affirm that Jesus is Lord. And then there are passages like Romans 13, which challenge us to submit to the authority of the state, as well.

Numbers of us struggle, however, with uncritical submission or allegiance to authority figures in the human realm. And rightly so. For in many cases our own experiences have taught us to question authority.

Chapter 7 narrates several regrettable instances of the misuse of authority in the local church. These case studies—drawn from firsthand experiences of students and colleagues alike—take us beyond the superficial environment of sanitized Sunday ministry to reveal the unhealthy exercise of pastoral authority that goes on behind the scenes in what I take to be a representative sampling of evangelical churches in America today.

The rest of the book (chaps. 8 and 9) wrestles with what is perhaps the most important question for recapturing in the church

today Paul's vision for servant leadership: *What social contexts in our churches will most naturally facilitate a Jesus-like, other-centered approach to pastoral ministry?*

Some ways of doing church readily lend themselves to the healthy exercise of pastoral authority. Others do not. This was true in Paul's day (see chap. 6) and it is true in ours. The corporate culture that has influenced much of church life in America today, for example, tends to inhibit—rather than facilitate—Paul's cruciform vision for authentic Christian leadership.

It is not hard to see why. The business model typically assigns to the pastor sole authority, as the CEO of an institution with a board of directors (generally called elders or deacons) whose ecclesiology is often marked more by the values of the *Wall Street Journal* than by the letters of Paul.

The pastor in such a setting seldom has a handful of genuine friends in the church who know his strengths and weaknesses and who have permission to speak into his life. An environment like this provides few checks and balances on the potential abuse of pastoral authority.

Please note that I do not wish to minimize the personal responsibility of persons who leverage authority in hurtful ways. Each of us will answer for the ways we lead our people. This is not a book, however, about the inner life of the Christian leader. It is a book about the institutional structures of our churches, structures that often determine the relational contours of our ministry.

I will maintain that the answer to the question of social context (above, in italics) lies in a community of leaders. Ideally the local church should be led by a plurality of pastor-elders who relate to one another first as siblings in Christ, and who function only secondarily—and only within the parameters of that primary relational context—as vision-casting, decision-making leaders for the broader church family. This, in a nutshell, is the central thesis of the book.

The goal here is not to push for a single form of church polity, though some approaches to church government will find it more challenging to implement Paul's values than others. My agenda is

broader and more inclusive. I am primarily concerned with function rather than form.

Wherever we land on the scriptural warrant for plurality leadership, and there is room for disagreement, the point here is that a leadership model that is highly relational will most naturally encourage the proper use of authority in local church ministry.

Accordingly, the book concludes by considering in some detail the pragmatic benefits of relational team leadership, for both pastors and their congregations.

The advantages for church leaders are rather straightforward, particularly where authority abuse is concerned. A community of leaders has the ability to maximize a pastor's strengths, while simultaneously intercepting and derailing potential abuses of spiritual authority before irreparable damage is done.

Less obvious, perhaps, but equally significant, are the benefits of team leadership for the broader church family. It is a simple fact that a team of pastors has the ability to model community—and the credibility to challenge their people to live in community—in ways a lone-ranger senior pastor, who answers to no one, will never have.

The social context of pastoral ministry thus has tremendous implications for the relational health of both local church leaders and the congregations in which they serve.

The Way of the Cross

There is a way back to the healthy exercise of authority in the local Christian church. It is the way of the cross. It is the way of Jesus, the most powerful being in the universe, who

existing in the form of God,
did not consider equality with God as something to
be used for His own advantage.
Instead He emptied Himself by assuming the form
of a slave,

taking on the likeness of men.
And when He had come as a man in His external
form,
He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the
point of death
—even to death on a cross. (Phil 2:6–8)

God intends, of course, for all Christians to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Paul addressed this remarkable passage to the whole Philippian church, not just to its leaders.

Yet it is interesting to note that Philippians is the only letter in which Paul includes a specific address to community leaders (“the overseers and deacons,” 1:1). Given current tendencies toward authority abuse in our churches, pastors and other persons of influence would do well to pay special attention to Philippians 2. Christ’s other-centered attitude toward power and status has particular application to those of us in Christian leadership.

Because Jesus led the way to the cross, because he modeled to the extreme the kind of sacrificial, selfless leadership that God desires in his shepherds, God vindicated his Son by exalting him to the highest place, so that every sentient being would publicly acknowledge Jesus’s position at the apex of the hierarchy of universal power and authority:

For this reason God highly exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth—and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (vv. 9–11)

God’s exaltation of Jesus assures us today that it is not those of us who minister in self-protective, self-promoting, ultimately hurtful and abusive ways that God will ultimately honor. It is those who follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

Pastors who model their ministries after Paul’s cruciform

vision for authentic Christian leadership can shepherd their congregations with the confidence that they will one day hear from their Master the most welcome words a minister of the gospel could ever hope to hear: “Well done, good and faithful slave! . . . Share your master’s joy!” (Matt 25:21, 23).