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# HOW SHALL WE THEN LEAD? PREFERRED POWERS IN THE KINGDOM COMMUNITY

*Dalton Reimer*

It is fashionable to lament the state of leadership in church and society, but the voices are confusing: from one corner come pleas for more authoritative leadership; from another for more shared leadership; from still another long sighs of discouragement because people do not follow; while from another disillusionment because millions seem to follow indiscriminately, whether president or television preacher. Leadership is both possible and impossible. People both follow and don't follow. Is all of this something new under the sun? Witness the stories of Moses, Elijah, David, the prophets, Jesus. My question: How then shall we lead?

We were examining French and Raven's classic study on social power in a college class that I teach. Five forms are identified: legitimate power, coercive power, reward power, referent power and expert power.

Legitimate power is based on the perception that one has a legitimate right to prescribe behavior for another.

Coercive power is based on the perception that one has the ability to punish another.

*...coercion is  
not the way of  
the Kingdom...*

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Reward power is based on the perception that one has the ability to reward another.

Referent power is based on one's identification or feeling of oneness with another — that is, one's personal attraction to another.

Expert power is based on the perception that one is knowledgeable or expert in a given area.

Which of these forms of social power, I asked the class, were predominantly used by Jesus? After working for some time in small groups, we shared our conclusions that people perceived Jesus as knowledgeable and wise (expert power) and personally attractive (referent power). I then pointed the class to the statement of Alvin Zander, senior scholar in the field of group dynamics that when “an agent of change acts as an informed expert or as an attractive model, target persons are more likely to be influenced and to respond more favorably to the influence attempts than if the influencer relies on rewards, punishments; (or appeals to legitimacy).” He then cites three studies which showed that behaving as an informed expert (expert power) and as an attractive model (referent power) were the most effective forms of power. Zander speculates that persons may respond better to these forms of influence than others because they imply respect for “the influenced person's ability to think for himself” and because they communicate trust in subordinates.

Before pursuing the question of Jesus' use of power, it is important that we clearly understand the nature of social power. *Social power*, I suggest, is an outcome that we attribute to one whose attempts at influence are endorsed. Thus, social power is not something that inheres in a person. It is not a quality of a person. Rather, it is the outcome of a transaction between two or more persons. Like a money check, unless an action is endorsed by the recipient, it has no value. Thus, power, in this social sense, is no power unless endorsed. A pastor who has experienced the pain of losing the endorsement of his congregation, whether informally or formally, understands this well. So does a board chairperson who has experienced the withdrawal of the endorsement of board members, a teacher who has lost the endorsement of students, a parent who has lost the endorsement of children, a business leader who has lost the endorsement of colleagues. Leadership has to do with social power. Where attempts at influence

are not endorsed, social power is absent and leadership is not possible.

Should leaders in the Kingdom community give preference to promoting the endorsement of some social powers over others? Perhaps the Gospel's picture of Jesus' model and teaching can help us address this question.

### *Contrasting Models of Leadership in the Gospels*

Three models of leadership explicitly surface in the Gospel accounts: the Gentile model, the scribes and Pharisees model, and the Jesus model. Each is characterized by a different order of preferred forms of power. Leaders in the Gentile model prefer coercive power, "lording" and "exercising authority" over those they rule. In response the people call them "benefactors" (Luke 22:24-27, Matthew 20:20-28, Mark 10:35-45). Leaders in the scribes and Pharisees model prefer expert power, sitting on "Moses' seat" interpreting the law. In response the people call them "rabbi" (Matthew 23:1-12). Jesus initially uses the method of contrast to focus his model. Jesus clearly rejects the coercive power of "lording." He clearly endorses the scribes and Pharisees model: "observe whatever they tell you." But he strongly criticized them for not earning complementary referent (modeling) power: "they preach, but do not practice." Whereas the Gentile leader is called "benefactor," the Jesus leader is to be called "servant." Whereas the scribes and Pharisees leader is called "rabbi," the Jesus leader is to be called first "brother — for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren" — and then "servant." The language of equality ("brethren") and subordination ("servant") best captures the essence of Kingdom leadership. Effective servanthood depends on expert power (competency) and referent power (attractive practice/modeling).

I am uneasy with the currently popular "servant leadership" if it is understood primarily as an attitude or relationship. In reality the servant leader in Jesus' model has rejected the crutch of coercive power and the security of inherited or ill-earned legitimate power in favor of expert and referent power that connote both competence and attractive modeling. No matter how submissive incompetent, non-practicing servant-leaders may feel, they will last no longer than the servant who buried his talent (Matthew 25:14-30).

Preferred powers in the Jesus model, then, appear to be expert and referent power. But let us further explore each power individually.

### THE POWER OF COERCION

Jesus' well known story of the prodigal son, (Luke 15:11-32) when seen in its cultural context, reveals the radical nature of power in the Kingdom. I follow here the literary-cultural interpretation of the parable proposed by Kenneth E. Bailey, a long-term Christian worker in the Middle East. Bailey assumes that current Middle East village culture, given its strong resistance to change, is very close to the culture of Jesus' time and so may provide potentially significant insights into the parables of Jesus. My interest here is with the father as leader in the household of the parable.

Bailey reports that he has asked endless village groups across the Middle East about the younger son's request for his share of the inheritance. Typically the conversation has gone as follows:

"Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?"

"Never!"

"Could anyone ever make such a request?"

"Impossible!"

"If anyone ever did, what would happen?"

"His father would beat him, of course!"

"Why?"

"This request means *he wants his father to die!*"

Bailey reports only two cases where anyone even knew of a situation where in fact a son had dared to request his inheritance before his father had died. In the first, the previously healthy father died in three months — of agony over the son's request, according to his wife. In the second, the father drove the son away from the home in great anger.

In Jesus' parable, then, the father's response represents a radical rejection of coercive power (beating the son and driving him from home). This radical break from cultural norms continues throughout the story. When the son returns, cultural norms dictate continuing use of coercive power: the father should require the son to wait for some time outside the gate before permitting entry to the house; upon entry the father should show great anger; and the son should be forced to apologize and should be punished in some way. "The village

would be led to understand that the father had indeed preserved his honor through discipline.” But not so in Jesus’ story. Defying the culture, the father gathers “the front edge of his robes in his hand like a teen-ager” and disgracefully “races” through the village street to meet his son. Proper older men always walk in a slow and dignified fashion. They never run. The actions that follow are in a similar spirit as the father re-establishes the son’s position in the home and the village. The subsequent dialogue with the older son reveals the same rejection of coercive power.

Coercion is not the way of the Kingdom. Few moments in Jesus’ own experience capture this rejection of coercion more poignantly than his lament over the city of Jerusalem. “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Luke 13:34-35, RSV). The force of coercion was not a considered alternative. For the disciples, however, it was. Earlier, James and John, those “sons of thunder,” had angrily proposed calling down fire on a Samaritan village that refused to accommodate them on their way to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-56). And later, Simon Peter actually drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest’s slave, who was in the company of those who came to capture Jesus (John 18:10). But Jesus rejected these actions, as well as the Zealot option in the larger political sphere (See John Howard Yoder). It was not that coercive power was unavailable to him. After all, he could call out twelve legions of angels to come to his rescue, he informed his disciples at the time of his arrest; but that was not his way. When preferred forms of power are not endorsed, he waits — at least for a season.

Waiting for a season is significant, because when preferred forms of power do not lead to endorsement, other forms of power become fall-back options. The paradigmatic way of dealing with an erring brother or sister, as outlined by Jesus (Matthew 18:15-20), illustrates this well. The dismissal of an erring person from the fellowship may be understood as a use of coercive power, but that is only a last option used when other forms of power are not endorsed. Likewise, Jesus’ action of turning over the tables of the money changers and driving at least the animals from the temple (Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-19, Luke 19:45-46, John 2:13-22) does not justify the use of coercion as a high-order preference. In the case of enemies,

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where one would expect it to be most appropriate, Jesus clearly rejects coercive power in favor of love and prayer (Matthew 5:43-48). It seems that within the Kingdom community coercive power as a low-order form of power is appropriate to maintain discipline, but in relation to subduing and overpowering the enemy it is inappropriate.

### LEGITIMATE POWER

My students rightly identified expert and referent power as two of the preferred forms of power used by Jesus. But they missed a major preoccupation also with legitimate power. This power is based on the perception that one has a legitimate right to prescribe behavior for another. As such it may exist independently or in partnership with another form of power. A child, for example, may view a parent as in a position to punish (coercive power) while simultaneously viewing such power as legitimate.

Legitimacy is a major issue in Jesus' ministry. His genealogical record, the birth narratives, the witness of John the Baptist, a voice from heaven, the miracles, the self-witnessing, the transfiguration, etc. all contribute to establishing Jesus' legitimate power. Endorsement varies. Spirits recognize his legitimacy and obey him. So do the wind and the sea. The bread and wine multiply. But among humans there is debate. John the Baptist himself needs reassurance that Jesus indeed is legitimate (Matthew 11:2-6). In his own home town of Nazareth he is rejected as illegitimate. The Jewish religious leaders are constantly questioning his legitimacy, asserting on one occasion that he was most illegitimate since it was by Beelzebub, the prince of devils, that he was casting out demons (Matthew 12:24). With his own disciples Jesus clearly focuses the legitimacy question: "But who do you say that I am?" This leads to Simon Peter's clear endorsement: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:13-20).

A dominant word for power in the New Testament is *exousia*. Sometimes translated as *power* and sometimes as *authority*, Walter Wink tells us that it appears 102 times in the New Testament and can best be understood as "legitimation." Jesus had *legitimate power*, and that may be the best way to translate *exousia*.

Legitimacy is a key question for today's Kingdom leaders and people as it was for Jesus and the people of his time. The

servant image suggests that legitimacy is a granted or bestowed power, as *exousia* also denotes. Servants have no inherent power; they can function only with power which the Master grants. But for that power to be social rather than merely individual, it must also be discerned and endorsed by the people. Discerning requires being able to read the signs of God's calling in another's story (e.g., pre-birth and birth narratives of Jesus, calling narratives of the apostles, the conversion narrative of Paul, our own stories) and the signs of giftedness as demonstrated in the actual use of expert and referent powers ("fruit," to use the biblical metaphor). Discerning and then endorsing completes the base for legitimate power in the Kingdom community.

Legitimacy is often not easily granted these days by the people. We may call it a crisis of authority. But it is also possible to conclude that too easy legitimacy is granted these days (e.g., political leaders, some tele-evangelists). Witness the recent outpouring of endorsement for Colonel Oliver North in the Irangate hearings in the United States. This, too, may be called a crisis of authority. In either case, blindness is not a virtue. Where endorsement in the Kingdom community is granted or withheld out of personal or collective preference, vision is clouded. It is not the individual will or the will of the people that the Kingdom community is to discern. It is the will of God, for the Kingdom community is God-centered, not self-centered. The primary issue then is not whether endorsement is difficult or easy. The question is: Is discernment properly focused? Is our vision clear? If it is, then we will look for the signs of God's calling and the signs of giftedness, and we will endorse these when present, with the measure of charity required by our shared humanity.

### *EXPERT POWER*

Expert power has to do with information, knowledge and wisdom — that is, with substance. As French and Raven state, it is based on the perception that the other "has some special knowledge or expertness." Here Jesus clearly excelled. Already as a twelve-year-old, he was amazing the teachers in the temple with his understanding and his answers to their questions (Luke 2:41-51). And he "increased in wisdom" as he grew older (Luke 2:52). Thus he was prepared for the early wilderness temptation experience where he expertly



thwarted Satan's efforts at reward power. As he began his ministry, his expertness was evident to the people. He was noted as teaching with "authority" (*exousia* power), which in its complexity of meaning certainly includes expertness (Matthew 7:28-29, Mark 1:21-22). In the temple the crowd was "spellbound by his teaching" (Mark 11:18 NEB). In Capernaum the people were "astounded at his teaching" (Luke 4:31-32 NEB). Even those who had been delegated by the Jewish leaders to trap him ended in amazement at his replies to their dilemmas (Mark 12:13-17). Finally, even the temple police refused to follow orders to arrest Jesus, justifying their insubordination to the chief priests and Pharisees: "No man ever spoke like this man!" (John 7:32-52).

Jesus' own self-testimony speaks to expert power. Testifying to his own uniqueness in having come from the Father, he was in a special position to reveal truth (substance) to whomsoever he chose (Matthew 11:27, John 8:12-20). For those who endorsed this privileged position as legitimate, his special knowledge became most compelling.

### REFERENT POWER

As a youth Jesus grew not only in wisdom but also in "favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52). *Wisdom* connotes substance; *favor* speaks of relationships. Referent power has to do with relationships. Attractive modeling, identification and love are primary activators of this power.

Whenever we communicate a message, we inevitably communicate both a substance and a para-message as to how we perceive our relationship with the other. Referent power exists when the relationship is attractive. The Apostle Paul sharply focuses the importance of referent power in his discussion of spiritual gifts. In each of the places where Paul lists spiritual gifts (Romans 12, I Cor. 12-13, Ephesians 4), he combines his discourse on the exercise of the gifts (expert power) with a reminder that relational love (referent power) is an essential handmaiden. Indeed, substance without relational love renders expert power useless (I Corinthians 13). Likewise, we do well to remember Jesus' critique of the leadership of the scribes and the Pharisees, who, according to Matthew's report, were faulted not so much for their lack of expertise as for their unwillingness to model what they taught (Matthew 23). They had no referent power. Thus, "favor with

God and man” as well as wisdom bespeaks power.

Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus modeled what he preached. His life was open for all to see: the company he kept, the food he ate, the wine he drank, the work he did, the places he slept, the places he walked, the words he spoke in moments guarded and unguarded. He modeled his injunction: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:15 RSV). He was attractive, and the fact that he modeled what he taught contributed powerfully to his referent power.

Models must be visible to be powerful. A problem in our fragmented society is that much of our lives is hidden from each other. We lead, work, play, eat, study and worship in different contexts. Only fragmented parts of our lives are open to each other in any single setting. If we are not invisible, we are mostly partial rather than holistic models. Ways to make invisible models visible are now required if leaders are to have referent power. More sharing of stories of what we are doing in the more hidden parts of our lives may be one way to become more holistic models.

Identification provides another primary key to Jesus’ use of referent power. Breaking through the social constraints of Jewish culture and ideology, he identified with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, the poor, Samaritans and Gentiles. He healed the sick and fed the hungry. And the people “sang his praises” (Luke 4:15 NEB). Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, he identified by helping those in need. And so people were attracted to him. Jesus’ death represents the ultimate act of identification. The impact of that act is referent drawing power: “...and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32). Referent drawing power is at the heart of the Gospel. It is not the force of coercion or reward power that saves, but the compelling attractiveness (referent power) of Jesus himself that draws everyone to him.

Love is a third primary contributor to referent power. In group dynamics research it has become customary to divide group functioning into two categories, one often called *task* and the other *social-emotional*. The first deals with substance, the second with relationships. Successful group functioning (and leadership) required effectiveness in both spheres. This insight is not new. It prevails in the New Testament description of Kingdom dynamics. Love (social-emo-

tional/relational) is hailed by Jesus as the hallmark of discipleship (John 13:35). The Apostle Paul, as already noted, succinctly integrates task and social-emotional dynamics in his discussions of spiritual gifts. His summary injunction to speak the truth (task) in love (relational) knits the two tightly together (Ephesians 4:15).

Referent power, then, exists in the sphere of the relational. It is a preferred power in the Kingdom community. Where one sees effective modeling, senses keen identification, and feels genuinely embraced by love, referent power is activated as one is drawn to the other.

A final observation about referent power. French and Raven hypothesize that "any attempt to utilize power outside the range of power will tend to reduce the power." For example, pretending to be an expert beyond the range of one's actual expertise will lead others to reduce their sense of our expertise. Referent power, however, tends to have the broadest range of any of the powers. We intuitively recognize the extreme when one person idolizes another to the extent that the other can do no wrong. In the Kingdom community referent power is not intended to supplant other powers, as it may if unchecked; but it exists alongside other powers as a vital and preferred power with broad range.

### *REWARD POWER*

Reward power is based on one's perception that another is in a position to provide rewards for approved behaviors. It is the preferred power of Satan. Jesus encounters it in his confrontation with Satan in the wilderness temptation experience (Matthew 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13). Though present, it does not seem to be a preferred power in Jesus' view of the Kingdom community.

Jesus addresses the issue of rewards in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6). Here he charges that those who sound the trumpet before giving alms, praying and fasting in order to win the praise of men (reward), have forfeited any reward from the Father. The Father indeed rewards, but not those who practice their piety for the purpose of public display. Piety is to be expressed "in secret" and with such innocence that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing.

On the other hand, in the same sermon Jesus promotes good works that are public and can be seen. One's good works

are not to be invisible. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works..." (Matthew 5:16). Invisible models, as I have noted above, have no referent power. But the end of going public here is not the self-seeking praise of the pious of Matthew 6. Rather, the end is that others may "give glory to your Father who is in heaven." So, whether practicing the piety of giving, praying and fasting, or modeling good works, treasure in heaven rather than on earth is to be sought.

The "health and wealth" gospel provides another arena of possible rewards. Humans have needs and cares. Seeing another as in a position to reward our behavior by meeting these needs and cares gives that person reward power over us. Followers of God rightly perceive him as having this power. "And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus," asserts the Apostle Paul (Philippians 4:19 RSV). But first things first. "...Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things (food, drink, clothes) shall be yours as well," states Jesus, again in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:33 RSV). Following this order of priorities, Jesus castigates the crowd who had aggressively searched for him the day after he had miraculously fed the 5,000. "Truly, truly, I say to you," Jesus charged the crowd after they had found him, "you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (John 6:26 RSV). Here the very nature of the Kingdom Jesus came to establish was at stake. Reward power was drawing the crowd, but Jesus was not pleased. Jesus then proceeds to engage in what I have sometimes called a purification of motives, but which in our present scheme may also be understood as an effort to establish the priority of his legitimate power as the Son of God. The end result, surely anticipated by Jesus, was that the crowd dwindled. "Rice Christians" (or bread Christians) have shallow roots. Fortunately, I suppose, Jesus was not dependent on the giving of the crowds for his ministry to survive.

North Americans (as other humans) love reward power. Promises of gain in health, wealth, beauty, power, security, or sex appeal are our common currency. It is difficult to imagine a Kingdom otherwise. And so in at least some expressions of North American Christianity, reward power has gained preeminence. It is visible for all of us to see in some current forms of tele-evangelism. But it is not new or recent on the North

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American scene. Sociologists Schneider and Dornbusch, some years ago, saw this preeminence clearly evident in the popular religious best sellers on the market in the United States between 1875 and 1955. They note that persons' attraction to the Kingdom may reflect one of two possible motivational sequences based on how the key text — "But seek ye first the kingdom of heaven and all these things shall be added unto you" — is ordered. The primary sequence follows the order of the text: faith produces action followed by results. The secondary sequence reverses the order: "results in prospect" produces faith which produces action, or the variant of "results in prospect" produces action which produces faith. They perceive the secondary sequence, which entices by placing the dominant focus on the prospect of reward, as a perversion of the message of Jesus. Yet the promise of rewards attracts us and is put forward by some as the preeminent Kingdom power. But not so in the original Kingdom. There legitimate, expert and referent powers were preeminent. Reward power was present, but it was not a pervasive carrot put forward to lure people into the Kingdom.

Yet rewards are indeed part of the Kingdom. When Peter observes: "Lo, we have left everything and followed you," and then poses the question: "What then shall we have?" Jesus does provide a list (Matthew 19:27-30). He ends his list with a statement that indicates there will also be surprises in the final distribution of rewards: "But many that are first will be last, and the last first." Matthew immediately follows this comment with the parable of the householder who hired workers to work in his vineyard at different times of the day and at the end paid them all the same wage (Matthew 20:1-16). Whereas the householder violated no agreements with his workers, his system of rewards is perceived as unjust. The householder, however, justifies his freedom to choose his own course with what is his. Again the conclusion: "So the last will be first, and the first last." Perhaps a certain innocence about rewards is again intimated. The left hand may in fact do best not knowing what the right hand is doing. But should one hand inadvertently discover the actions of the other, a fall-back option is provided by Jesus in his instruction to servants: "...when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty'" (Luke 17:10 RSV). Reward power, though present, is not a preferred power in the Kingdom community.

A final comment. In our North American culture reward power has a way of worming its way to preeminence in obscure disguises. Its pervasiveness in our culture makes it sometimes difficult to detect. Take, for example, the explanation of an unhappy, departing church member: "My needs aren't being met." Now if that church has been preaching that the preeminent purpose of the Gospel is to reward people by meeting their needs, then the departing church member's explanation is perfectly consistent. Why should she not leave if she is not rewarded by having her needs met? Her action is of the same order as that of the fellow who sued his church to recover his offerings because the promised blessings hadn't come. Now it isn't that the church shouldn't meet people's needs. Jesus did. And the conservative, evangelical church has particularly needed a corrective emphasis on the whole person. But to turn the corrective into the center is to subvert the Gospel. "Pray. It Works!" promises a nearby billboard. Reward power moves to preeminence without effort or strain in our culture — and even in the church.

### *Conclusion*

How then shall we lead? Leading is a complex adventure. Its currency is endorsed social powers. Which powers? In the Kingdom community, preeminently legitimate, expert and referent powers. Sometimes reward power. Rarely coercive power. Principled Kingdom leaders will give priority to promoting the preferred powers.

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