

Toward a Christological Model of Leadership: Understanding Ethical and Moral Leadership Through a Sacred Texture Analysis of Philippians 2:5-11

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Utilizing social rhetorical criticism and sacred texture analysis, this exegetical study examined the Christological model of leadership presented in Philippians 2:5-11. Although previous research has labeled Christ a servant leader, this analysis revealed that while servant leadership must be part of the Christian model, Christological leadership exceeds servant leadership. Comparing the Pauline model of leadership with the theory of cognitive dissonance and the theory of behavioral integrity illustrated that ethicality and morality are not issues of theory, but of praxis. Ultimately, the Kenosis Hymn provides contemporary leaders with an exemplar model of ethical leadership that emphasizes removing cognitive dissonance and implementing behavioral integrity.

Keywords: leadership, Christological leadership, servant leadership, behavioral integrity, social rhetorical criticism

INTRODUCTION

Few crises have posed such vital ethical challenges for leaders as COVID-19 (Gostin, Friedman, & Wetter, 2020). Decisions made by leaders in managing the impact of this infectious disease have altered public trust and will likely result in the creation of new laws and regulations to help ensure compliance with ethical standards. Discussions about workplace challenges, including but not limited to, employment inequities, policies related to working remotely, and ethical duties to support vulnerable employees (e.g., minorities, women, and working parents) have emerged during this global pandemic. As Gostin et al. (2020) argued, during the global pandemic, ethical dilemmas have emerged as leaders wrestle with the question of how to ethically and legally balance public trust with civil liberties. The impact of COVID-19 on businesses and organizations has sparked an emergence of interest in gaining public trust and incorporating models of ethical leadership. Leaders have been forced to make difficult policy decisions to ensure the safety and well-being of employees and customers. However, regulations alone have not and will not result in a surge of moral and ethical decision-making.

As Bagin and Fulginiti (2006) noted, a law simply tells leaders what they *must* do, while an ethic guides the leader on what they *should* do. Karecki (2008) explained, “From a Christian perspective, good leadership requires much more than techniques or skills. Christian leadership calls for something much deeper and much more challenging” (p.1). In a like manner, ethical leadership requires much more than creating policy, implementing laws, or incorporating moral and ethical guidelines in corporate mission statements. While searching for a resurrection of ethical leadership, scholars have turned to a variety of sources. However, leadership experts and scholars have often failed to examine the leadership provisions

outlined in the Sacred Texts. Furthermore, as Mabey, Conroy, Blakeley, and De Marco (2017) argued, research on ethical leadership and spiritual leadership that includes a Christian perspective, “largely misconstrues and misapplies teachings of its founder, Jesus” (p. 757).

Although Mabey et al. (2017) addressed the void in the leadership literature regarding Jesus’ teachings about leading ethically; they did not provide an analysis or understanding of a specific Christological model of leadership. As Mabey et al. argued, the teachings of Jesus can serve as a guide for implementing behavioral integrity (i.e., closing the gap between what we say and what we do) and dealing with ego. In order to apply Christian thought to ethical leadership, researchers and practitioners need a detailed understanding of what Christological leadership looks like. Therefore, utilizing Robbins’ (1996a) social rhetorical criticism and sacred texture, this exegetical analysis examined the Christological model of leadership presented in the Philippians Hymn and provides a deeper understanding of a model of ethical leadership outlined through the example of Jesus.

SOCIO-RHETORICAL CRITICISM: SACRED TEXTURE ANALYSIS

Although Robbins’ (1996a) socio rhetorical criticism offers a five-layer multidimensional approach to interpreting texts, this analysis focused only on the sacred texture of Philippians 2:5-11. Robbins (1996b) explained, “Analysis of sacred texture is a way of systematically probing dynamics across a spectrum of relationships between the human and the divine” (p.4). Sacred texture analysis examines aspects of Deity, Holy person, Spirit being, Divine history, human redemption, human commitment, religious community, and ethics (Robbins, 1996b). Although Christ has been said to epitomize servant leadership, this sacred texture analysis revealed that although servant leadership must be part of the Christian model, Christological leadership exceeds servant leadership. Ultimately, the Kenosis Hymn provides contemporary leaders with a Christological model of leadership that emphasizes removing cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and implementing behavioral integrity (Simons, 1997). Utilizing Robbins’ (1996a) social rhetorical criticism and sacred texture, this exegetical analysis begins with a brief background of the Philippians hymn followed by a discussion of the theoretical foundation of the Christological model of leadership derived from this study.

Background of Philippians Hymn

Fitzmyer (1988) explained that the Philippians Hymn has sparked debate over almost every aspect of the text. The two most contentious aspects of the passage revolve around two major areas: structure and authorship. According to Bratcher (2003), the hymn begins in verse 6 and can be divided into three main parts (a) verse 6, introduced by the pronoun “who” referring to Christ Jesus, focusing on the privileged status of Christ; (b) verses 7-8, introduced by the disjunctive “but,” focusing on the self-abasement of Christ; and (c) verses 9-11, introduced by the conjunction “therefore, also” focusing on God exalting Christ. In contrast, other scholars place verses 6-8 and 9-11 together, arguing that the hymn is structured with three beat stanzas (Lohmeyer, 1928). Melick (1991) contended that verses 6-8 speak of Jesus’ servant hood, while versus 9-11 speak of Jesus’ exaltation. Silva (2005) suggested that verse 5 reveals Paul’s exhortation, verses 6-8 Christ’s humiliation, and verses 9-11 Christ’s exaltation.

Many scholars have also questioned the Pauline authorship of this hymn. Several interpreters have suggested that the passage has a Semitic background, which seems to translate to an Aramaic origin (Melick, 1991). For the purpose of this sacred texture analysis, the debate over authorship and structure is insignificant. As Melick (1991) contended, “what does matter is that Paul chose to use the material to make his point, it is consistent with his views about Jesus, and he puts his approval on it by building his argument around it” (p.99).

Peterson (2004) noted that Roman culture (not unlike contemporary American culture) valued force, competition, and honor seeking. Much like the Romans, contemporary Christian leaders are often convinced that life and legacy are “secured by our winning-socially, economically, politically, religiously” while everyone else loses (Peterson, p.180). House, Javidan, Hanges, and Dorfman (2002) defined *leadership* as the “the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward

the effectiveness and success of an organization” (p. 5). As Yukl (2020) noted, “Controversy about the definition of leadership involves not only the person who exerts influence but also what type of influence is exercised and the outcome” (p. 4). The word *influence*, stems from the Latin word *Influere*, meaning, “to flow into” (Bagin & Fulginiti, 2006). The city of Philippi, founded by Philip, Father of Alexander the Great, was founded on the site of the ancient city *Krenides*, a name that means “wells or fountains” (Barclay, 2003). Ironically, the Apostle Paul’s letter to Roman Philippi, written while Paul was in prison, proclaims the importance of moral and ethical influence (i.e. to flow into).

Deity and Holy Person

Describing the nature of God sets the stage for analyzing the sacred texture of the text (Robbins, 1996b). God is mentioned in Philippians 2:5-11 four times (i.e. Twice in Phil.2:6; Once in Phil. 2:9; Once in Phil.2:11). Although God is recognized in this pericope, God does not speak explicitly as He might in the Old Testament. As Norris (2008) noted, “God works behind the scenes in this text” (p.2).

Paul not only acknowledges the deity of God in the text, but also the deity of Jesus. As Bekker (2006) explained, Jesus is depicted as the divine; therefore, a call to imitate Christ is a call to imitate God” (p.3). Verse 6 begins, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God” (NRSV). These two parallel statements show the exemplary nature of Jesus’ thoughts (Melick, 1991). Paul uses the Greek word *morphe*, translated into English as *form*, meaning outward appearance, or shape. “Form indicates an outward appearance consistent with what is true, the form perfectly expresses the inner reality” (Melick, p.101). Thus, Jesus offers the prime example of behavioral integrity.

Simons (1997) defined *behavioral integrity* (BI) as “the perceived congruence between values expressed by words and those expressed through action” (p.90). Whereas integrity is the adherence to moral and ethical principles, BI is the extent to which principles match actions. Behavioral integrity is a critical component of transformational leadership (Simons, 1997) and servant leadership (Washington, Sutton, & Feild, 2006). As Peterson (2004) argued, Paul’s focus in Philippians is not on Jesus’ divine or human nature, but rather on what Jesus has done, and the “mind” displayed in this narrative.

For the believers of Philippi, “equality with God was not primarily about metaphysical, it was about status, and Roman society was built upon the pursuit of status” (Peterson, 2004, p.179). Thus, the hymn does not communicate who Jesus was Christologically as much as what he did soteriologically (i.e. the greatest act of love) (Marchal, 2004). This view parallels the idea of Martin (1987), who argued that Philippians 2:5-11 is an incarnation hymn, parallel in meaning to the Fourth Gospel. Furthermore, Jesus represents the Holy person in this hymn. Christ did not regard the advantage of His deity but humbled Himself taking the “form” of a slave. As McClain (1998) suggested, “Careful attention to the details of Philippians 2 helps state, as well as the human mind can comprehend, just what the kenosis involved and hence how His humanity and deity related to each other” (p. 85). *Kenosis* stems from the Greek word *ekenosis*, meaning emptied (Bratcher, 2003). As Bekker (2005) noted, in Franciscan theology *kenosis* is seen as “a resolute divesting of the person of every claim of self-interest so as to be ready to live the Gospel of Christ in every aspect of living freed from the dictates of personal preference” (p.2). This kenosis hymn explains that Jesus did not see “His equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Verse 6-7, NRSV).

Divine History

Robbins (1996b) suggested, “Many sacred texts presuppose that divine powers direct historical processes and events toward certain results” (p.123). Philippians 2:5-11 reveals God’s divine plan through the story of incarnation. Norris (2008) noted, “the wisdom of God operates throughout history, and there is a reason for the pre-existent Jesus to take the form of bond-servant...” (p.4). Jesus did not exploit His position of power.

The incarnation story reveals that Jesus was obedient to the point of death. Certainly, death on a cross was not the behavior the Philippians recognized in Roman leaders such as Nero or Claudius (Peterson, 2004). While rulers like Nero continued to “grasp” for power, Jesus willingly released His power. Barclay (2003) explained, “Jesus did not think it robbery to be equal with God; he did not regard existence in

equality with God as something to be snatched at” (p.42). The Greek word for robbery is *harpagmos*, which means, snatch or to clutch (Barclay, 2003). This may either mean (a) Jesus did not need to snatch at equality with God, because it was His divine right, or (b) Jesus did not need to clutch at equality, holding it jealously to himself, but rather laid it down willingly for the sake of humanity (Silva, 2005). As Peterson posited, “Jesus emptied himself not of divine attributes but of status; he made himself of no reputation” (p.179).

The hymn’s reference to “slave” (v. 7) would have been a familiar term to the people of Roman Philippi. According to Marchal (2007), slavery was a predominant aspect of the imperial economic structure of Rome. Throughout the hymn, Christ takes on the role of slave (v.7) and master (kyrios, v.11). Marchal explained, “Christ is also obedient, but to the extreme—even to death, receiving a slave’s execution, crucifixion (2:8)” (p.248). Christ voluntarily chose a life of slavery, unlike typical slaves living in involuntary captivity. Thus, during His slavery, Christ exercises His freedom.

Martin (1987) suggested that this passage is reminiscent of the prophetic story of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. Isaiah 53:12 states, “He poured out his life unto death” (NRSV). Certainly, by humbling Himself to the lowly status of a slave, Christ exemplifies love. As Paul writes in Galatians 5:13, “To serve one another is to love” (NRSV). Love and service are intertwined, they cannot be separated. Christ dying on the cross is the greatest act of love, a love exemplified through divine history. Furthermore, Christ’s incarnation emanates love, and for a leader to mirror Christ’s attitude they must also proceed with love and service. In verse 9, the hymn uses “therefore” to shift into the future exaltation of Christ. Thielman (1995) suggested, “Just as God exalted Christ to the highest place in response to his obedience, so the Philippians if they remain steadfast in faith through enduring persecution and seeking unity with one another will be glorified” (p.114).

Human Redemption and Human Commitment

Robbins (1996b) explained, “Another benefit of sacred texture is the transmission of benefit from the divine to humans as a result of events, rituals, or practices” (p.125). In the conceptualization of leadership substitutes theory, Kerr and Jermier (1978) noted the importance of leaders recognizing factors in the subordinate, task, or organization, which may “substitute for leadership”. Drury (2003) noted, “The modeling of God’s leadership... is an example to us that sometimes as leaders we need to do nothing at all and let the people do what God is calling them to do” (p.32). As leaders, Christians should not seek power or attention, but should empower followers to achieve greatness.

Perhaps the greatest example of this is the act of human redemption and commitment exemplified in the kenosis hymn. God does not “step in” but allows Jesus to become incarnate. Marrow (as cited in Norris, 2008) noted, “God uses the Philippians hymn to underscore the pre-existence of Jesus with God the father, his incarnation as Jesus Christ the Son, the redeemer of mankind through his resurrection and exaltation” (p.5). Norris elucidated explaining that, as a master would offer an equivalent slave to buy back another slave, God offered his son in exchange for us.

Paul continuously uses the word *phronein*, meaning to set one’s eye on or to have an attitude (Bratcher, 2003). Verse 2:5 proclaims, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (NRSV). Bekker (2006) noted, “... the opening words of the hymn as a call to imitate should be read as referring to social relations and, therefore, ethical behavior” (p.7). The Philippians hymn provides a directive to imitate the ethical behavior modeled by Jesus. As Bratcher (2003) posited, in verse 5, Paul is referring to “the whole attitude of like mindedness, unity, humility that has been the Epistle’s focus since 1:27” (p.3).

Paul is calling the community of believers to release selfishness and arrogance and imitate Christ’s humility. Humility does not indicate demeaning oneself, but simply putting others first. Therefore, Paul provides an organizational hierarchy consisting of God first, others second, and self last. Following the example of Christ, Christians must engage in self-emptying service.

Religious Community

Robbins (1996b) explained, “... Human commitment regularly is not simply an individual matter, but a matter of participating with other people in activities that nurture and fulfill commitment to divine ways” (p.127). Themes of obedience, service, love, and humility encompass Paul’s vision of committing oneself

to community. The Philippians were to serve and love resulting in a community of believers built on a set of values far different from the rest of the world (Bratcher, 2003). Just as Christ had an attitude of humility, self-sacrifice, and obedience, leaders should also demonstrate these qualities as a means of achieving unity (Thielman, 1995).

Bratcher (2003) suggested that the key point of the Philippians letter is the “willingness to lay aside all rights of personal privilege, to submit in the spirit of servanthood to the needs and concerns of others.” However, models of leadership that exemplify servant hood (e.g. servant leadership, Greenleaf, 1977; authentic leadership, Avolio & Gardner, 2005; spiritual leadership, Fry, 2003) should not be implemented to seek reward. In fact, as Bratcher pointed out-- last now, first later is not a model of servant hood. True servant hood indicates that the leader is not concerned with personal gain or winning, but rather serves in order to empower others.

Scholars often fail to discuss the importance of joy in the Pauline model of leadership. Barclay (2003) noted that the letter to the Philippians has been called the Epistle of Excellent Things and the Epistle of Joy. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul repeatedly uses the words joy and rejoice. Paul, writing from prison, realizes he might die for his beliefs. However, he is willing to die. He, too, is “obedient to death” (Philippians 1:21). Paul not only models Christ’s obedience, but he models joyful service. Community indicates much more than unification because “it is right thing to do.” Christians must seek to joyfully love and serve one another. Christian interactions must proceed from a place of joy and love.

Bratcher (2003) suggested that the solution to problems in interpersonal relationships may be an attitude of humble commitment to others. The idea of “humble commitment” takes interactional theories, such as LMX (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975) to a new level. Yukl (2020) described Leader Member Exchange (LMX) as the “the role making processes between a leader and each individual subordinate and the exchange relationship that develops over time” (p.117). LMX theorists posited that most leaders develop separate exchange relationships with each subordinate (Minsky, 2002). Research focusing on organizational outcome variables illustrate the tremendous rewards garnered by leaders, followers, and organizations from high quality LMX relationships. Yukl (2020) noted that high exchange relationships result in more sharing of information, tangible rewards such as pay increase, personal support and approval, and facilitation of the subordinate’s career. Although the foundational concepts of LMX theory are ethical (i.e. inclusiveness and acceptance), the theory should not be implemented as a means of receiving rewards or payoffs. Leaders should offer opportunity for high quality LMX relationships to all subordinates as an act of genuine service, humility, joy, and love.

Ethics

Robbins (1996b) suggested, “Ethics concerns the responsibility of humans to think and act in special ways in both ordinary and extraordinary circumstances” (p.129). For Christians, ethical actions are motivated by commitment to God (Robbins). Paul begins in verse 5 by admonishing the Philippians to be unified. As Thielman (1995) noted, “His concern is not merely with the inner attitudes of the individual Philippian believers but with concrete expressions of their attitudes in their day-to-day interactions with each other” (p.115).

Bagin and Fuginiti (2005) suggested that a *moral* is an “inward guiding principle from upbringing, religion, education, life experience, and other influences” (p.352). In contrast, an *ethic* is an outward behavior resulting from an inward moral principle (Bagin and Fulginiti). Festinger (1957) argued that a mismatch between morals and ethics may lead to an uncomfortable imbalance within a person, referred to as cognitive dissonance. Burnes and James (1994) explained, “When individuals sense an inconsistency between attitudes and behavior, they will feel uncomfortable and frustrated” (p.16). Burnes and James provided the following example:

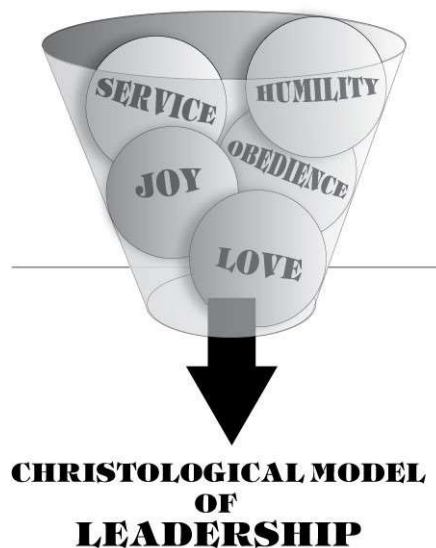
If a supervisor believes that tight control of those for whom he or she is responsible for is required to make them work hard the supervisor will be uncomfortable if required to give them a greater degree of autonomy. To reduce this discomfort (dissonance) he or she may either change his/her attitudes or ignore/circumvent the new regime. However, if the supervisor cannot reduce the dissonance for whatever reason, then this may result in stress, anger, and resentment ... (p. 17).

Cognitive dissonance may emerge in Christian leaders when they are forced to work in an environment that is diabolically opposed to the ethical behaviors demonstrated by Christ. As a result, there may be a disconnect between morals (inward guiding principles) and ethics (outward behaviors), leading to lack of behavioral integrity. Philippians 2:5-11 calls Christians to model the behavior of Christ-relinquishing inconsistency (dissonance) and exemplifying behavioral integrity. As Black (as cited in Bekker, 2006) noted, “The emphasis here is not paraenetic but ethical, with the conduct of Christ as the ultimate [paradigm] of Christian behavior” (p.7).

PAULINE DEPICTION OF CHRISTOLOGICAL MODEL OF LEADERSHIP

The sacred texture analysis of Philippians 2:5-11 revealed that the Pauline depiction of the Christological model of leadership consists of obedience, service, humility, love, and joy. Figure 1 depicts this model.

**FIGURE 1
PAUL’S DEPICTION OF THE CHRISTOLOGICAL LEADERSHIP MODEL**



Contemporary Models of and Leading Ethically

Greenleaf (1977) posited that service to followers is the primary responsibility of the leader and service is the core of ethical leadership. Laub (1999) suggested that servant leaders: (a) value people, listening receptively and serving the needs of others first; (b) develop people, providing opportunities for learning, modeling appropriate behavior; (c) build community, building strong relationships; (d) display authenticity, displaying integrity and trust; (e) provide leadership, envisioning the future; and (f) share leadership, sharing decision-making power, and sharing status and privilege at all levels of the organization. Certainly, Jesus modeled the behaviors of servant leadership. However, although some previous researchers have labeled Christ a servant leader, the Christological model of leadership depicted by Paul, exceeds servant leadership. Thus, just as Jesus became more than a servant (i.e. a slave), He also became more than a servant leader.

In discussing the leadership of St. Clare of Assisi, Karecki (2008) utilized the foot-washing leader construct. In discussing the complicated matrix of Clare’s leadership, Karecki explained, “it is rooted in the Clare’s appreciation for the mystery of incarnation, her embrace of the kenotic (self-emptying) Christ, and her spirit of service” (p. 4). Certainly, Jesus was a “foot washing leader”, as demonstrated in John 13. However, once again, foot washing leader signifies the model of self-emptying and service but may delete other qualities depicted by Jesus.

The model of leadership depicted by Paul in the Kenosis Hymn signifies that Jesus encompasses all that is good in any leadership model. Jesus is the quintessential ethical leader. Yukl (2020) noted, "Ethical leadership is an ambiguous construct that appears to include a variety of diverse elements" (p.418). Thus, the ambiguity ends when theorists begin to describe ethical leadership as the behavior of Jesus depicted in the kenosis hymn. Several criteria are relevant in judging an ethical leader (a) values, (b) stage of moral development, (b) conscious intentions, (c) freedom of choice, (d) use of ethical and unethical behavior, and (e) types of influence used (Yukl, 2020). No one can duplicate the leadership of Christ because He is pure in action, thought, motive, and deed. However, Christians should strive for Christ's worthiness.

Kanungo and Mendonca (1996) suggested that *altruism* is the value that drives the positive versus negative behaviors in leadership. Drury (2003) explained, "Altruism (intent is to benefit others) is thus the antidote to a negative *egotistic* motivation (intent is to benefit self)" (p.46). Drury contended that in Christian leadership, the motivation is as important as the result. She stated, "The church leader can never say, "Well, it worked, and we grew, so it's good" in defending the ends justify the means" (p.47). Thus, in implementing ethical leadership, the specific model of leadership is not the problem. The problem emerges from the motivation behind the model. The Kenosis Hymn provides contemporary leaders with a Christological model of leadership that emphasizes removing cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and implementing behavioral integrity (Simons, 1997).

Kouzes and Posner (1993) explained that credibility is a crucial element of effective leadership. For instance, they noted that credibility is necessary in the

development of employee loyalty and commitment. They explained that leaders can increase credibility "by simply doing what they say they will do" (p.47). Therefore, leaders must make sure that their principles match their actions-implementing behavioral integrity and eradicating cognitive dissonance.

CONCLUSION

As Gostin et al. (2020) argued, few crises have posed such vital ethical challenges for leaders as COVID-19. In search of ethical guidelines in this unparalleled time, many leaders need guidance and models of ethical leadership. As leaders seek guidance in how to cope during this time of uncertainty, leadership lacking behavioral integrity has resulted in decreased follower and public trust. While searching for a resurrection of ethical leadership, scholars have turned to a variety of sources. However, leadership experts and scholars have previously failed to examine the leadership provisions outlined in the Sacred Texts.

The Apostle Paul's letter to Roman Philippi proclaims the importance of moral and ethical influence (i.e. to flow into). Specifically, the Kenosis Hymn, presented in Philippians 2:5-11, provides a Christological model of influence and leadership. As Karecki (2008) explained, "Christian leadership calls for something much deeper and much more challenging" (p.1). Thus, while searching for a resurrection of ethical leadership, scholars must utilize the example of Jesus depicted in the Kenosis Hymn. Comparing the Pauline model of leadership with Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance and Simon's theory of behavioral integrity illustrated that ethicality and morality are not issues of theory, but of praxis. Ultimately, the Kenosis Hymn provides contemporary leaders with a Christological model of leadership that emphasizes removing cognitive dissonance and implementing behavioral integrity. This model is vital any time but especially as leaders meet the demands of COVID-19.

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