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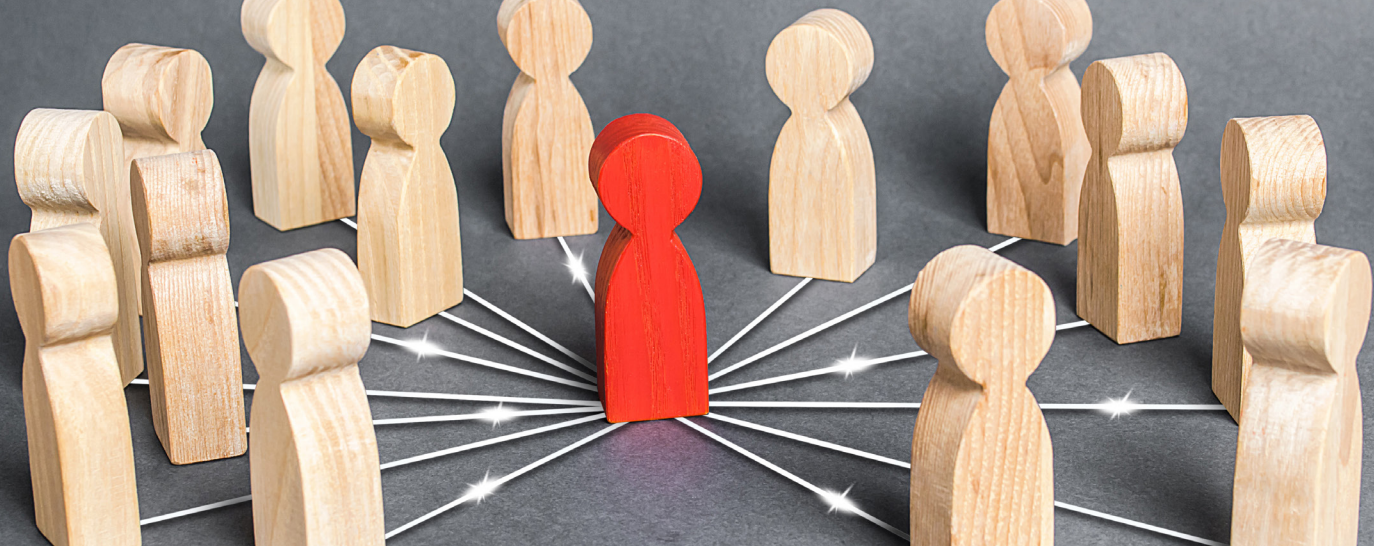
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**“Shepherds After God’s Heart”: A Biblical Perspective on the Use of Power and Authority in Leadership**

Boubakar Sanou

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# SHEPHERDS AFTER GOD'S HEART: A Biblical Perspective on the Use of Power and Authority in Leadership

*By Boubakar Sanou*

An understanding of the concepts of power and authority is indispensable to any form of effective leadership. At an elemental level, power is the ability to do something. Authority refers to the legitimate permission to exercise power. One important thing that differentiates power and authority is that a person can have power, but lack the authority to exercise it or they can have authority, but lack the ability to make things happen. Both are needed in leadership. When God created Adam and Eve in His image, He gave them power and authority to take dominion over the rest of creation (Genesis 1:26). To establish Joshua as Moses' legitimate successor, God commanded Moses to give him some of his authority and commission him in the presence of the whole Israelite community so that they would be obedient (Numbers 27:19–20). Before commissioning His disciples for mission, Jesus gave them the authority necessary for successful ministry (Matthew 10:1). When He set the Great Commission as the agenda for the Church in all ages, Jesus granted full permission to His disciples to act in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18–20).

The use of power and authority in spiritual leadership in the Church is the focus of this article. Because “leadership opens one to the dangerous temptation to abuse power or to assume superiority over others,”<sup>1</sup> it has the potential to create crises. The article explores the concepts of power and authority in leadership from the perspectives of the Creation narrative and selected passages of Jesus' ministry to highlight some lessons for Christian leaders.

## **Power and Authority in Leadership**

Gene Wilkes notes that in leadership, power and authority “are the medium of exchange that leaders invest in their relationships to influence people to move from their current reality to their shared vision of the future.”<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Pfeffer defines power as “the ability to influence behavior, to change the course of events, to overcome resistance, and to get people to do things they would not otherwise do.”<sup>3</sup> The third and fourth elements in Pfeffer's definition (“to overcome resistance and to get people to do things they would not otherwise do”) may be wrongly interpreted to

<sup>1</sup> Jacques B. Doukhan, “The Creation Narrative,” in *Servant and Friends: A Biblical Theology of Leadership*, edited by Skip Bell (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2014), 32.

<sup>2</sup> Gene Wilkes, “The Use of Power and Authority in Leadership,” <http://www.bhcarroll.edu/2018/03/power-and-authority-in-leadership/>.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Pfeffer, *Managing with Power: Politics and Influence in Organizations* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1992), 30.

mean that leaders have a license to coerce or manipulate others to achieve their own agendas rather than inspiring and motivating them to achieve mutually beneficial goals. According to Keltner et al, "Power is an individual's relative capacity to modify others' states by providing or withholding resources or administering punishments."<sup>4</sup> What the above definitions highlight is that, depending on how it is used, power can have both positive and negative effects on people, organizations and society at large.

John French and Bertrand Raven have suggested one of the most influential typologies of power in leadership. They identified position power and personal power as the two main types of power. They proposed three sources for position power, namely legitimate, reward and coercive powers, and two sources for personal power, namely referent and expert powers.<sup>5</sup> Peter G. Northouse identifies information power as a fourth

## ***"Coercive Power... uses fear as a means to get others to act in a recommended way."***

source of position power.<sup>6</sup> Whereas position power refers to the power that only a leadership position confers to someone, personal power is the influence one wields not necessarily by virtue of their leadership position, but because of their inherent personal characteristics or expert knowledge. With personal power, an individual can develop and enable others through influence without being officially recognized as a leader in their organization. The aforementioned six sources of power are briefly discussed below.<sup>7</sup>

**Legitimate Power.** Legitimate power is associated with having status or formal job authority. It enables a person to influence other organization members because of the position he/she holds in the organization. The influence wielded by that person is legitimate as long as it remains within the scope of their stated authority.

**Reward Power.** This type of power enables leaders to recognize and reward the contribution of their subordinates through different forms of appreciation such as promotion, recognition, increased responsibility, etc.

**Coercive Power.** This type of power is derived from leaders' ability to influence their subordinates' behavior through punishment or the threat of negative consequences. It uses fear as a means to get others to act in a recommended way.

**Information Power.** This power is rooted in a person's ability to influence others' behavior because of information he/she has that others do not have or desperately need.

**Referent Power.** This power finds its source in people's admiration, identification and liking for an individual and their desire to be like him/her. In an organization, this individual could be a positional leader or not.

**Expert Power.** Expert power is based on an individual's ability to influence others' behavior because of his/her recognized knowledge, skills or expertise.

Authority in leadership, on the other hand, is the claim of legitimacy and right to exercise power. It is the formal right given to leaders to exercise power in a legitimate way in order to fulfill a set of responsibilities needed to achieve the objectives of their organizations. In democratic systems, authority is the permission granted to leaders to exercise legitimate power. There are two major typologies of authority. The first one, suggested by Max Weber, outlines three major types of authority: legal authority, traditional authority and charismatic authority.<sup>8</sup> The alternative typology, suggested by Thomas Thomson Paterson, outlines the following five basic types of authority: structural authority, sapiential authority, charismatic authority, moral authority and personal authority.<sup>9</sup> These typologies of authority are briefly described below.

Weber's **Legal Authority** is identical to Paterson's **Structural Authority**. This refers to the authority granting an individual the right to exercise legal power by virtue of their position in an organization.

**Traditional Authority.** This form of authority rests on the sanctity of established social, cultural or religious norms that confer legitimacy to those who occupy traditionally endorsed positions of authority. Reference is constantly made to traditions, customs and conventions as a way to ensure compliance.

<sup>4</sup> Dacher Keltner, Deborah H. Gruenfeld, and Cameron Anderson, "Power, Approach, and Inhibition," *Psychological Review* 110, no. 2 (2003): 265.

<sup>5</sup> John R. P. French and Bertrand Raven, "The Bases of Social Power," in *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory* edited by Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 259-269.

<sup>6</sup> Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, Seventh edition (Los Angeles: Sage, 2016), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Fred C. Lunenburg, "Power and Leadership: An Influence Process," *International Journal of Management, Business, and Administration* 15, no. 1 (2012): 1-9; French and Raven, "The Bases of Social Power," 259-269; Northouse, 10; Debra L. Nelson and James Campbell Quick, *Understanding Organizational Behavior*, Fourth Edition (Mason, OH: South-Western/Cengage Learning, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Thomson Paterson, *Management Theory* (London: Business Publications, 1966).

*Charismatic Authority.* This authority finds its source in the devotion to a person who is thought to have supernatural powers or qualities.

*Sapiential Authority.* This type of authority is granted to a person by virtue of their exceptional knowledge, skills or experience.

*Moral Authority.* This refers to the legitimacy granted a person for their ability to influence others by virtue of their exemplary ethical standards.

*Personal Authority.* This type of authority gives a person the right to be heard by virtue of some inherent personal qualities.

Any of the above bases for power and authority can be used for good or abused. As stewards of God's authority, all Christians need to use their influence in a manner that glorifies God and contributes to the wellbeing of His people.

## Leadership: A Biblical Perspective

The Bible is a leadership reference book *par excellence*. It is full of leadership principles and concepts that can be applied to various contexts. Unfortunately, "The dominant images and metaphors used to describe and define the nature of leadership in the church have been borrowed and carried over from other arenas such as business, without much *critical reflection*."<sup>10</sup> It is often wrongly assumed that the characteristics and skills of Christian leadership are not different from leadership in other areas of society. Blackaby and Blackaby rightly point out that "Much secular leadership theory is based on presuppositions that may appear sound yet promote ideas contrary to the Scriptures. ... Spiritual leaders who *merely* use secular methods may experience some degree of worldly success, but they will not fulfill their calling as spiritual leaders."<sup>11</sup> I submit the following three questions as a guide to how Christian leaders should conceptualize leadership: (1) What did God say about leadership? (2) How did Jesus model leadership? and (3) What does God look for in Christian leaders? These questions are examined below.

### Leadership Insights from the Creation Account

The first three chapters of Genesis are foundational texts for a biblical perspective on leadership. They

offer important insights on spiritual leadership in the Church. Following are five of those insights.

1. Leadership is first and foremost a divine prerogative. Commenting on the creation narrative, Jacques Doukhan points out that "The first word of the Hebrew Bible, *bērēšît*, which is generally translated 'in the beginning' (Genesis 1:1), encapsulates the essence of leadership; it is derived from the word *rōš*, which literally means "head" and is the technical term normally used to designate one who is leading in a given situation. Thus the creation event is described as an act of leadership. Creation is leadership *par excellence*."<sup>12</sup> This means that Christian leaders are steward/apprentice leaders accountable to God.
2. Leadership is a group process (Genesis 1:26). Commenting on this, Peter Northouse notes that, rather than being "a trait or characteristic that resides [only] in the leader," leadership is "a transactional event that occurs between the leader and the followers. ... When leadership is defined in this manner, *it becomes available to everyone. It is not restricted to the formally designated leader in a group*."<sup>13</sup> As a function of the whole community, effective leadership takes place in the context of conversation, not command or control. Being created in the image of God confers dignity on humans and entrusts them with responsibility and the capacity to emulate God. For Christian leadership, this means that all members deserve to be objectively treated and equally heard by virtue of the dignity, responsibility and capacity the image of God affords them, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, gender or background.<sup>14</sup>
3. Christian leadership is a call to serve. Like God, who served humans by giving them all they needed for their wellbeing (Genesis 1:2–25, 29) and got His hands "dirty" in the process (Genesis 2:7),<sup>15</sup> service should be the vocation of every Christian leader. It is through selfless service that leaders succeed by adding value to other people's lives.
4. To lead includes empowering and delegating (Genesis 1:26, 28; 2:19–20). God empowered Adam and Eve with His image and His blessings and made them "cocreators" with Him through

<sup>10</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 116. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>11</sup> Henry T. Blackaby and Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2003), xiii.

<sup>12</sup> Doukhan, 31.

<sup>13</sup> Northouse, 6. Emphasis is mine.

<sup>14</sup> John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 137–138.

<sup>15</sup> Doukhan, 34.



procreation, dominion over the earth, and the naming of animals. Thus, Creation was a cooperative act. Although God could have ruled the earth on His own, He chose to do it with others, despite the risks. The key point is: “If we want people’s intelligence and support, we must welcome them as cocreators. People only support what they create.”<sup>16</sup>

5. Genesis 3 not only reminds Christians of the reality and impact of sin on humans’ relationships with God and with each other, it also gives them a biblical precedent on how to deal with poor choices people make. There were at least three options that were available to God when Adam and Eve willfully disobeyed Him. First, He could have just discarded them, that is, let them die as the result of their sin and then create new human beings. Second, He could have let them languish forever under the consequences of their bad choice. The third option, which God chose, was that of redemption. The Fall narrative shows Christians that to lead after God’s own heart is to deal with people’s poor choices in a redemptive way by graciously seeking them (Genesis 3:7–10), graciously confronting them (Genesis 3:11–13), and graciously offering them reconciliation and restoration (Genesis 3:14–15). It also suggests that God’s expression of His love and compassion is just as essential to Him as is His expression of His justice and holiness.<sup>17</sup>

### Leadership Insights from Jesus

Jesus set the example for the use of power and authority in spiritual leadership in the Church by calling His disciples to find greatness through servanthood, pointing to the fact that He Himself came not to receive service but to give it (Matthew 20:28). He constantly warned them against any immoral or unethical use of the power and authority delegated to them. When James and John requested the highest positions in Jesus’ kingdom, it caused the other ten disciples to voice their frustration, probably because they also desired the same for themselves. Jesus seized that opportunity as a teaching moment on spiritual leadership (Matthew 20:20–28). He validated power and authority as the currency of leadership, but at the same time reoriented “*the use of power and authority away from gaining advantage over others toward serving them.*”<sup>18</sup> He wanted them to use the spiritual powers and authority He bestowed

on them not as a source of personal aggrandizement or mercenary adventure, but rather as an opportunity to selflessly serve others and to influence them to be His disciples (Matthew 10:1, 8). His emphasis in His many exhortations on humility is that true honor resides not in self-exaltation, but in being exalted by God (Luke 14:7–14; 18:9–17). Jesus later on displayed His servant attitude to His disciples in the Upper Room. The disciples’ preparation for the Passover Feast did not include the services of a servant to wash feet at the door as it was customary to do so. When the time came, none of them volunteered for this job, generally performed by the lowest ranking person in a group. That explained why they argued over who was the greatest among them (Luke 22:24). Jesus used the occasion to teach them a practical lesson of humility and selfless service by washing their feet, as the lowest ranking person in the room would do (John 13:3–11). Rather than using His power and authority to His own advantage, He willingly emptied Himself and took the form of a bond-servant (Philippians 2:6, 7). This visual lesson in servant leadership was a clear demonstration that, on Jesus’ team, a position of leadership should be approached as an opportunity for service. This unique act of service is a reminder for Christian leaders that a Christ-like attitude of humility is essential to being receptive to God’s will. Also, as Christ’s followers, they must be willing to serve in any way that brings glory to God.

Because of Jesus’ revolutionary approach to power and authority, His listeners “were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (Matthew 7:28–29). This powerful testimony to His authority, in contrast to that of the scribes, is in the fact that the scribes’ authority came from their erudition in earlier scholars’ views and their own formulation of new interpretations of Scripture and tradition. Their influence was tied only to the fact that they were learned men.<sup>19</sup> Other than that, “their practices had muted the authority of the Old Testament because they added so many traditions and legal requirements that the power of the Scripture was defeated (e.g., [Matthew] 15:1–9). Thus, they could not speak with authority, for they had muted the only source of authority.”<sup>20</sup> In contrast, Jesus’ teaching bore God’s own authority, for what He said was deeply rooted in Scripture. He spoke for God and not simply about God, as the scribes did. In addition, there was also no dichotomy between what He said and how He lived. Through His words and actions, it was undisputable that His interest was

<sup>16</sup> Margaret Wheatley, *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2007), 80.

<sup>17</sup> Walton, 258.

<sup>18</sup> Wilkes. (Italics in the original).

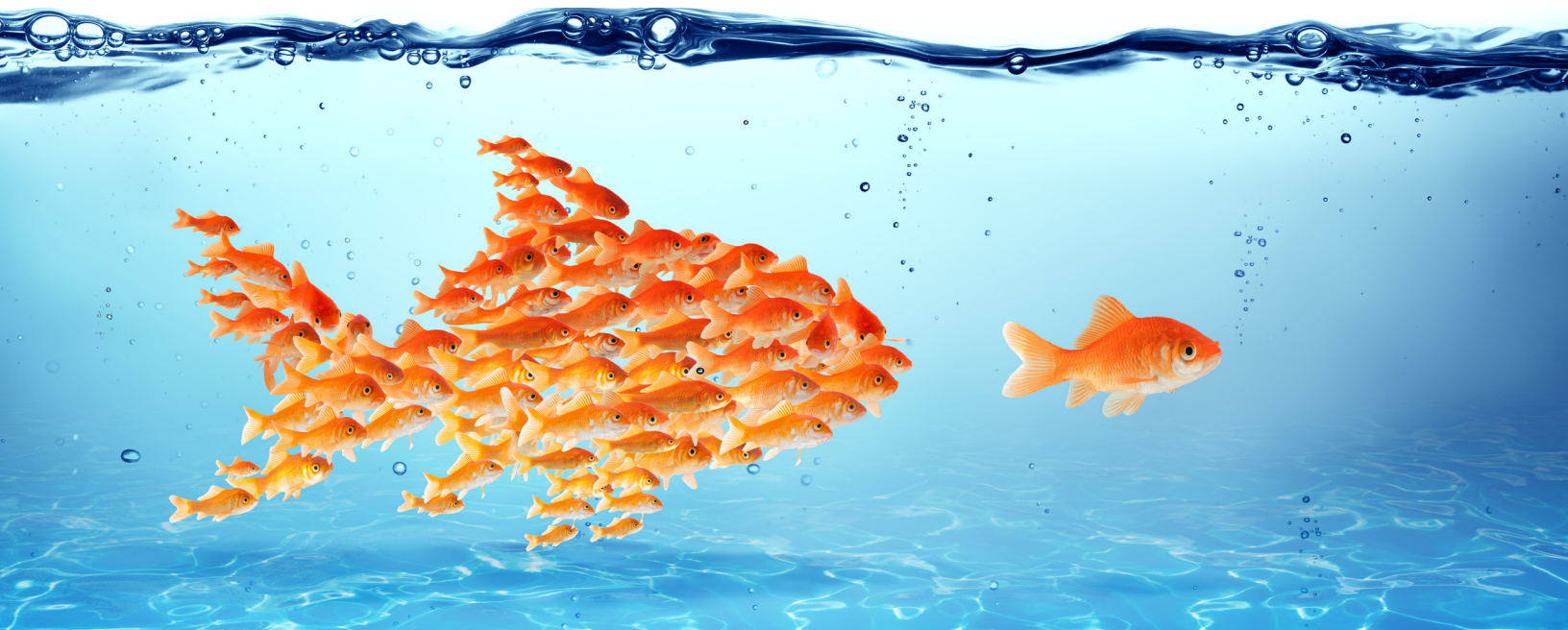
<sup>19</sup> David E. Garland, *The NIV Application Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 70.

<sup>20</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 328.

in the wellbeing of others. Thus, the crowd's commendation of Jesus was a subtle revelation about their crisis of confidence in their religious leaders.

Based on Jesus' example, the power that spiritual giftedness and the authority that the gospel commission conferred on church members was always viewed in the apostolic age as a position of service (*diakonia*) to the community of the people of God (1 Corinthians 16:15–16; 2 Corinthians 3:7–9; 4:1; 5:18; 2 Timothy 4:5; Ephesians 4:11–12). In contrast, the priests and elders of the Jews did things differently. They used their authority to tightly control and even oppress others. Being high-ranking members of the priestly line and members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling establishment,

Baptist's source of authority for calling all Israel to repentance in light of the coming of the Messiah (Matthew 22:15–22). He knew that John had several convincing claims to legitimate authority. First, John had authority through lineage, as his father was a priest. Second, the rare privilege his father had to burn incense in the temple added to the authority his lineage conferred to him (Luke 1:9). Since "there were many more priests and Levites than necessary (perhaps 18,000) for any given function in the temple, they were chosen for specific tasks by lot, during their appointed time of service (besides service on the three major festivals, they served about two weeks out of the year). Given the number of priests, a priest might get the opportunity in



they saw themselves as the sole holders and conferrers of religious authority; thus assuming the prerogative that belongs to God alone. That is why they confronted Jesus about the source of His authority (Matthew 21:23–27). Questions like, "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?" (Matthew 21:23) probably referred to: (1) Jesus' disruption of their commercial activities in the temple the previous day, thus shaming them before the crowds over whom they wielded illegitimate religious authority (21:12–13); (2) His authority to heal (21:14–16); or (3) His authority to teach in the temple (21:23). According to the sectarian standards of the religious leaders, Jesus had no authority to do any of these things since He was neither an official priestly nor scribal authority.<sup>21</sup>

Jesus responded to the religious leaders' question with a counterquestion by asking them about John the

Luke 1:9 only once in a lifetime; this would have been a special occasion for Zechariah."<sup>22</sup> Third, the special circumstances that surrounded John's birth added extra credit to his ministry as emanating from a divine source (Luke 1:5–25; 39–80). All these three undeniable evidences to John's authority were well known to the religious leaders, laypeople and even to Herod, who was king at that time. Thus, Jesus had a watertight case with John, who had previously pointed to Him as the long-awaited Messiah (John 1:29–34; see also John 19:19–28). Because it was clear to all that John's ministry had divine origin and therefore was legitimately authoritative, his testimony about Jesus meant that Jesus also had divine authority to do whatever He wished, even in the temple, although He had no formal training.<sup>23</sup>

Jesus made four points clear about authority in His discussions with the religious leaders: (1) there are

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 694–696.

<sup>22</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Second Edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 179.

<sup>23</sup> Darrell L. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 502.



two distinct sources of authority in the community of God's people: one divine and the other human; (2) not all forms of authority are ascribed by religious and ecclesiastical systems; (3) ecclesiastical authority may not always be in conformity with divine authority; and (4) if divine authority is known, but religious leaders make decisions that contradict it in order to benefit their own agendas, it is divine authority that should be obeyed. Jesus pointed to the same principle of loyalty to divine authority in Matthew 22:15–22, when the Pharisees attempted to trap Him with the tax issue. A key point contained in His statement, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (verse 21), is this: The coin which bore Caesar’s image should be surrendered to him; but because human beings bear God’s image, they should surrender themselves to God’s authority. In other words, the less important matter of authority should be given to humans, but the weightier matter in one’s life and call to ministry should be given to God.<sup>24</sup> That is why, when the Sanhedrin attempted to keep the apostles from fulfilling their calling, they firmly replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (Acts 5:29).

The foundation of Jesus’ use of power and authority is His sacrificial love. This is how John the beloved disciple portrays that love: “... Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1). This is a striking statement. Although Jesus knew that He would soon be betrayed by Judas, and for a time disowned by Peter and deserted by all the rest, He still loved them to the fullest extent. Despite our

own shortcomings, He also continues to show us the same love and invites us to do the same for others (John 13:15). One of the best ways to respond to such a love is to ask for His grace to let go of bitterness and resentment towards those who have hurt us, as these are some of the major hinderances to serving as Jesus served.

## Conclusion

Christians are stewards of God’s authority by virtue of the gospel commission. As steward leaders, they are called to lead, in whatever capacity, by following God’s model. The power and authority delegated to them are an extension of Jesus’ own power and authority. As such, they are to be exercised in the same manner as He exercised His.<sup>25</sup> Instead of exploiting and dominating others, or being obsessed with self-esteem, self-fulfillment and self-glory, Christian leaders need to always use their power and authority for God’s glory and the greater good of those they are called to serve. Because leadership is God’s prerogative, no human being has the right to positional leadership or to claim prerogatives that belong to God alone.<sup>26</sup> That would be coveting the throne of God, which is not without consequences (Cf. Isaiah 14:12–15; Ezekiel 28:12–17).<sup>27</sup>



**Boubakar Sanou**, DMin, PhD, is an assistant professor of mission and leadership at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University.

<sup>24</sup> Keener, 102.

<sup>25</sup> Wilkins, 390.

<sup>26</sup> Doukhan, 32-33.

<sup>27</sup> See Stan Patterson, “Up the Down Path: Power, Ambition, and Spiritual Leadership,” *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2013):8–15.

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