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Decentralization and the Shared Leadership of the New Testament

The connection between worldview and practice is argued by many. Walsh and Middleton, Erickson, and Colson and Pearcey are just a few examples. Noting that our choices are shaped by our worldview, Colson and Pearcey define the concept as, “the sum total of our beliefs about the world, the ‘big picture’ that directs our daily decisions and actions” (14). As a whole, the authors noted above agree that what one thinks and believes will necessarily shape how one behaves, for beliefs, thoughts, and actions are inextricably linked.

In this chapter, the author argues that the worldview of New Testament Christians led to a theologically informed practice of leadership that was distinctly decentralized or shared. This decentralization was seen on at least two levels. First, decentralization was seen in the general network-style form of loose affiliation among the churches of the first century. Second, decentralization was seen in the practice shared leadership among congregational members. Though both of these levels will be highlighted, primary emphasis will be placed on illustrating the decentralized practices on the second level of shared forms of leadership.

In order to better understand the ancient examples of organizational and leadership decentralization and how decentralization may inform leadership practice and the worldviews of contemporary leaders in this era, the following considerations will be examined: (a) an overview of shared forms of decentralized leadership and their place in the broader context of leadership studies, (b) a look at the expressions of and reasons for decentralized leadership practice in the New Testament church, and (c) the application and benefit of decentralized forms of leadership in contemporary organizations.

Decentralization in the Contemporary Leadership Literature

As with most principles drawn from the Scriptures, not only are they theologically grounded, but they prove to be sound in terms of contemporary organizational studies as well. Collins' research on leader humility illustrates this principle. Additionally, research by Kouzes and Posner, as well as Simons, illustrates this principle in the emerging research being done on credibility and trust that followers need to see and have in their leaders. As with these examples, so it is with the practice of decentralized forms of organization and leadership. Toward the end of better understanding decentralized practice, shared forms of decentralized leadership will now be contextualized in the broader leadership literature.

Beginning at the macro level, Northouse defines leadership in this manner: "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (3). Though—in keeping with the emphasis of this chapter on decentralization—I take issue with limiting leadership to an "*individual*" influencing, the focus of defining leadership around influence is important. Further supporting the centrality of influence in defining leadership, Yukl notes that while there are as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept, nevertheless, "most definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a process whereby intentional influence is exerted" (2).

Within the breadth of leadership approaches that emphasize influence there are several that describe leadership as possessing varying degree of decentralization. A quick glance at leadership standards like Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership reveals the presence of leadership styles such as participative, collaborative, communal, collective, democratic, consensual, egalitarian, and considerate. While all of these leadership practices express unique dimensions of decentralization, they do however illustrate the prominence of such work.

In leadership studies the balance between autocratic and democratic leadership

approaches has led to ongoing discussions and debates. Another way of articulating this balance is the understanding of the appropriate application of both control and empowerment.

Addressing this historic duality in leadership studies, Bass raises an important question. He writes, “How can the leader balance the advantages of a more democratic approach, which ordinarily contributes better to the commitment, loyalty, involvement, and satisfaction of followers, with a more authoritative approach, which contributes to order, consistency, and the resolution of conflict?” (415).

Answering Bass’ question is not easy, for many contextual factors must be considered when determining an appropriate balance in a specific situation. For instances, contexts in which quality decisions need to be made in a rapid manner likely would be situations in which more autocratic forms of leadership would be both appropriate and more effective. Whether it is an airline pilot negotiating a crisis situation or a military leader making a wartime battlefield decision, such circumstances are rightly conducive toward autocratic forms of leadership. Providing support to such an understanding, Torrance found that U.S. Air Force aircrews exhibited greater performance improvements when given highly authoritarian feedback, and Penner, Malone, Coughlin, and Herz came to similar findings.

Just as there are times for authoritarian forms of leadership, so there times for more democratic forms of leadership. As Bass notes, democratic approaches tend to result in better follower commitment, loyalty, involvement, and satisfaction. And specifically addressing decentralization, he argues that it, “usually brings with it more opportunity to react quickly and flexibly to opportunities and threats to the organization” (583). He continues: “Less filtering of information can occur that is of consequence to the decisions made by the decentralized units. More ‘ownership,’ sense of responsibility, and commitment are posited for the decentralized design” (583).

Within the broad category of democratic leadership, however, it is helpful to understand yet another distinction. This is the distinction between participative and shared leadership forms. One of the leadership models that utilizes a participative leadership category within it is Path-Goal theory. House and Mitchell's article on the Path-Goal Theory of Leadership provides a context for understanding the primary leadership behaviors of the directive leader, the supportive leader, the participative leader, and the achievement-oriented leader. Related to this discussion of decentralization, it may be useful to engage the participative form of leadership in this model. In contrast to purely directive forms of leadership behavior, participative leaders seek to consult with followers by utilizing subordinate suggestions prior to making decisions. While participative leadership is helpful in that it may lead to a greater sense of subordinate involvement, it is important to note that it differs from more collaborative forms of shared leadership.

Again, as with autocratic leadership, there are contexts in which participative forms of leadership are useful. For example, participative leadership practices are useful when a leader faces the competing values of needing to maintain decision-making control on one hand and the need to facilitate follower ownership on the other. One of the risks in participative leadership though is when the leadership style becomes merely token in its solicitation of follower input. Providing a reminder of the leadership danger of token participation, Bass writes, "When executives call meetings ostensibly to reach shared decisions but in actuality to inform and announce to subordinates their decisions...they are practicing token participation" (438). Authentically collaborative forms of shared leadership differ from both token participation and authentic forms of participative leadership in that those invited to engage in the leadership process are actually vested with substantive decision making prerogative in partnership with others. Such forms of leadership are shared forms of leadership practice.

In his discussion of shared leadership, Daft notes that, “Decentralization is an essential aspect of true community, and decisions are reached by consensus” (261). One of the central dimensions of such leadership is collaboration, for collaboration is a necessary characteristic of those seeking to operate within such decentralized structures of shared leadership. These leaders exemplify the unique tendencies of both assertiveness and concern for others (Bass 303), and these are the characteristics which Blake and Mouton associate with ideal leaders.

The literature on shared leadership may be categorized around five primary literature sets. These are human resource management, general management and organizational studies, health care and health care administration, education, and ecclesiastical studies. Though it is not the intent of the author to provide a thorough review of the shared leadership literature in each of these areas, selected findings will be identified below for the purpose of better understanding the general findings in the literature.

Jackson provides a useful starting point by both describing the concept of shared leadership as well as presenting four key associated concepts. Jackson notes that, “Shared leadership is a management model based on the shared governance philosophy” (166), and that in the model of shared leadership the four key associated concepts are accountability, partnership, equity, and ownership. Identifying leadership activities that may lead to such things as accountability, partnership, equity, and ownership, Taggart found that providing staff a greater role in decision-making, improving staff access to their managers, closing the gap between managers and staff, and creating dialogue among management, staff, and unions were four useful steps in the creation of an environment of shared leadership in the New Brunswick region of Human Resources Development in Canada.

Citing a source from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, Langston and Corcoran note that,

“Leaders create space for others to lead,” and that, “Future leaders must know how to share leadership responsibilities with people who bring different skills, expertise, and perspectives” (218). This concurs with what Bradford and Cohen argue in their book entitled Power Up: Transforming Organizations Through Shared Leadership. Noting that the traditional leadership models of command and control do not release the organizational power necessary for success, Bradford and Cohen argue that a “post-heroic” model of shared leadership is necessary for tapping into the wealth of resources represented in organizational members. One of the questions posed by Bradford that gets at this is what percentage of an employee is this organization utilizing? (Power Up With Shared Leadership Strategies). While the traditional models of command and control have access to some of this employee potential, Bradford would argue that shared forms of leadership lead to greater stewardship of the organization’s human resources.

In light of these benefits of decentralized forms of shared leadership, it’s now appropriate to address some of the expressions of and reasons for decentralized structures and practices in the leadership of the New Testament church. While some may question the relevance of investigations into the practices of antiquity, it is important to remember that the past may provide powerful lessons for leaders in the present. To ignore the past, especially the past as understood in light of the Scriptures on which so many Judeo-Christian societies have been founded, is to become inappropriately ignorant of the centuries of ideas and histories to which our contemporary world is connected. With this, we turn now to examples of decentralization in the New Testament.

Examples of Decentralization in the New Testament

Having covered an overview of the literature on shared leadership, this section now focuses on the ecclesiological expressions of decentralization in the first-century church of the New Testament by addressing how leadership in the New Testament functioned in light of

decentralization. In order to examine the decentralized expressions of leadership from an ecclesiological perspective, the following areas of shared leadership in the New Testament will be examined: (a) plurality of leadership, (b) leadership through influence and empowerment, and (c) consensual decision-making.

Plurality of Leadership. Noting three essential features of a New Testament definition of leadership, Bilezikian writes, “Leadership is a servant ministry, based on spiritual gifts and *always plural*” (130, emphasis added). This seems like an extreme statement, but the overwhelming testimony of the New Testament Scriptures is that leadership within the church was always plural and shared among a collective group. Even in the cases of individual leaders such as Timothy and Titus, their roles in Ephesus and Crete accordingly were in collaboration with Paul and sending churches, and were meant as transitional roles in which plural forms of leadership would be established. Note Paul’s words to Titus confirming this: “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders [—a plural form of church leadership—] in every city as I directed you” (New American Standard Bible [NASB] Titus 1.5). The eldership was a primary means by which this shared practice of plural leadership was exercised in the first-century church.

Why is it that plural forms of leadership were standard in the New Testament church? I believe the primary answer is found in passages such as Acts 20.28 and 1 Peter 5.2. To the elders in Ephesus Paul says, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (NASB Acts 20.28). In this passage, the church is not one leader’s church, or even the church of a group of leaders, but rather it is “the church of God.” Further confirming this, Peter writes to a group of elders among whom he counts himself: “shepherd the flock of God among you...not yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the

flock” (NASB 1 Pet. 5.2-3). Again, it is “the flock of God,” not the flock of the leader or leaders.

If it is God’s church, who then is the leader of the church? Paul argues in Ephesians 4 that the leader of the church is Christ Himself: “speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ” (NASB 4.15). In light of Paul’s argument, it is important that all members of the church of God serving in leadership type capacities do so under the full authority of the ultimate leader of the church—Jesus Christ. Interestingly, even in narrowing the primary leadership down to the singular person of Christ, in light of the Trinitarian divinity of God even this singular leadership brings us back to the community of shared leadership in the Godhead, in which God in all His relational being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit provides leadership to the church. In so doing Christians are provided a model for what it means to lead in community.

So how did the New Testament church model this leadership in community? Some of the primary expressions of this are seen in the plurality of leadership among the apostles, elders/overseers, and deacons. The apostolic leadership of the first century church is seen leading together in plural community in the book of Acts (e.g., Acts 15.22). When deacons are discussed in the New Testament, they likewise are placed within the context of plurality (e.g., Phil. 1.1; 1 Tim. 3.8-13). Finally, throughout the book of Acts, the writings of Paul, and the general epistles, elders/overseers are repeatedly seen functioning in plurality. In order to demonstrate this, some of the specific examples of leadership plurality among elders/overseers will be highlighted from the above-mentioned portions of Scripture.

Though the words for “elders” and “overseers”—*presbyteros* and *episkpos* accordingly—are different words, the New Testament authors seem to use these words interchangeably. Arguing for this point, Schreiner notes that the proximity of the usage of these words in Acts 20.17-28 suggests, “that the two terms are different names for the same function” (387). In this

passage, the leadership of the church at Ephesus is seen in the existence of a group of elders (17), and this plural expression of leadership was called to, “be on guard for [themselves] and for all the flock...to shepherd the church of God” (NASB 28). Also recorded in the book of Acts, Luke records the presence of a group of elders involved in the leadership of the church in Jerusalem (15.2, 4, 6, 22; 16.4). Finally, during Paul’s first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas are said to have appointed elders in every church in the region around the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts 14.23).

In Paul’s writing, elders/overseers are addressed in plural expressions as well. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul specifically recognizes the overseers in the church along with the deacons and all the saints (Phil. 1.1). In 1 Timothy, Paul provides a detailed description of the qualification of overseers (3.1-7), and later in his letter, Paul addresses how the church should treat its elders (5.17-19). The one additional treatment of this in Paul’s writing is seen in Paul’s letter to Titus. In this letter, Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders in every city as directed by Paul (1.5), and provides a description—similar to that in his letter to Timothy—of the qualifications of overseers (1.7-9).

Beyond the book of Acts and Paul’s writings, a description of plural forms of eldership are also affirmed in the books of James and 1 Peter. In James, James calls the Hebrew Christians of the dispersion (1.1) to, “call for the elders of the church,” when anyone is sick, noting that this is in order so that the elders might pray over the sick one, “anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord” (NASB 5.14). Furthermore, Peter addresses those “scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bythynia” (NASB 1 Peter 1.1), noting that the elders among the churches were to, “shepherd the flock of God” (NASB 5.1-2).

These examples demonstrate the unity of ecclesiological form among the leaders of the New Testament church. As seen throughout the book of Acts, the writings of Paul, and the

general epistles, the leadership of elders/overseers was a leadership of plurality. Grudem writes, “there is quite a consistent pattern of *plural elders* as the main governing group in New Testament churches” (912). And as Schreiner notes, “Leaders are not autocratic or dictators in the Pauline churches” (385), but rather their plurality of leadership was a leadership to which followers voluntarily submitted to (e.g., Heb. 13.17), for it was a leadership, “mainly by example and persuasion, not by coercion” (Schreiner 385). Through this remarkably unified expression of leadership plurality in the New Testament, decentralization makes its way into the leadership forms and structures through shared leadership. While leadership is ultimately centralized in the Godhead, God dispenses some of His leadership prerogative to groups of leaders in His church as an expression of decentralization.

Leadership through Influence, Equipping, and Empowerment. As noted by Schreiner, leadership among New Testament Christians was not a leadership of coercion. Rather, as an expression of decentralization, leadership in the New Testament church was about serving followers and leading them through authentic patterns of influence and empowerment. In this way, the shared leadership of plurality in the early church was a structure in which the church was provided for and served. Evidence of this is seen in both the Gospels and the writings of Paul, and therefore this section will explore these expressions of decentralization in these writings by looking at the sacrificial-servant model of leadership lived and taught by Jesus, as well as the outgrowth of this model in the form of influencing, equipping, and empowering church members to participate in the life and ministry of the church of the first-century.

The sacrificial-servant model of Jesus is seen multiple times throughout His life and teachings. Jesus often taught His disciples about leading through service (e.g., Matt. 20.28; Mk. 8.6; 10.45; Lk. 22.27; Jn. 12.26), becoming like children (e.g., Matt. 18.3; Mk. 10.15; Lk. 18.17), and that it was the last who would be first from God’s perspective (e.g., Matt. 19.30;

20.16; Mk. 9.35; 10.31; Lk. 13.30). Beyond teaching such lessons, Jesus modeled this sacrificial-servant model through His washing of the disciples' feet (Jn. 13). Through this act of heavenly-humility, Jesus taught His disciples a vital lesson about Christian leadership—"If I then the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you" (NASB 13.14-15). While Jesus' teaching and example in these instances were powerful lessons of servant-hearted leadership, His ultimate expression of this was yet to come.

As an ultimate expression of this model of sacrificial-servant leadership, on behalf of His followers Jesus willingly sacrificed Himself through crucifixion. Addressing His coming crucifixion (Mark 9.31), Jesus speaks of the sacrificial-servant focus He was bringing to the ultimate expression of this type of leadership: "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all" (NASB 9.35). And again He says: "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (NASB 10.45). The suffering and death of Jesus Christ was the most powerful lesson of sacrificial-servant leadership for His followers because inherent within the human heart is an understanding that, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (NASB John 15.13). Not only did Jesus teach this, but He also lived it—proving the most excellent way of love (1 Cor. 12.31-13.13) that any aspiring to leadership in the church must be willing to embrace.

Understanding the foundational teaching and example of Jesus in these matters, Paul makes the case that the humble model of sacrificial-servant leadership exhibited by Jesus means that followers of Him should, "have this attitude in [themselves] which was also in Christ Jesus" (NASB Phil. 2.5). But how did leadership in the New Testament church practice such leadership? How did they, "through love serve one another" (NASB Gal. 5.13), while still remaining faithful to their calling as leaders in the church? The pattern of leadership through

influence, equipping, and empowerment provides a key answer to this question, and Ephesians 4 provides textural witness of this pattern.

Laying the groundwork for his discussion of how such sacrificial-servant leadership may be practice within the church, Paul begins Ephesians 4 in this manner: “Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love” (NASB 1-2). In keeping with Jesus’ model, humility, gentleness, patience, and love provide the basis for unity of church members—leaders and followers alike. Flowing out of this, Paul identifies the purpose leaders serve in the church: “[Christ] gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (NASB 11-12). While elders/overseers are not mentioned in this list, the leadership-oriented apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers are said to be given to the church not primarily for practicing their areas of ministry service, but rather, “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service.” This theme of empowerment holds out great promise for contemporary leadership willing to invest in organizational members.

Because leaders in the New Testament church did not lead coercively (Schreiner), but rather through persuasion and influence, this passage shows the next leadership step following influence. This next step was to engage voluntary participants in the New Testament church through the practice of ministry equipping. New Testament leaders did not serve the church merely by doing the ministry of the church, rather they used influence to persuade members of the church to be equipped and empowered for ministry service (Eph. 4.11-12). Those who are empowered but not equipped run the danger of not knowing how to participate in the ministry of the church. Those who are equipped but not empowered run the danger of not knowing if they’ve

been granted the freedom to participate in the ministry. But when members of the church are equipped and empowered—an implicit teaching within Ephesians 4—the church is able to move toward maturity. Rather than being as “children” (NASB 14), the New Testament church was, “to grow up” (NASB 15), for as individuals served “according to the proper working of each individual part” (NASB 16), the result would be, “the growth of the body [—the church—] for the building up of itself in love” (NASB 16).

This is a powerful picture of decentralization in the New Testament church as leadership expresses decentralization by focusing on leading through influence, equipping, and empowerment. In contrast to this type of decentralization, leadership that is centralized can take two forms in the church: (a) leaders taking the responsibility of doing the ministry themselves without equipping and empowering others, or (b) leaders expecting ministry from others, but doing so in a coercive or commanding manner. Associated with these two types of centralized leadership are corollary dangers. On the one hand, leaders who take responsibility for doing the ministry themselves can foster an environment in which followers feel unnecessary and peripheral to the life of the church. On the other hand, leaders who expect ministry from others, but do so in a coercive manner can foster an environment in which followers may feel oppressed and become increasingly bitter.

The sacrificial-servant model of Jesus, expressed through the leadership practice of influence, equipping, and empowerment, answers the challenges of centralization. This was the leadership taught in the first century church. This was the leadership practiced by the early leaders of the New Testament church. And it is this expression of decentralization that holds out great hope for contemporary organizations seeking to learn from the model of leadership found in the New Testament.

Consensual Decision-Making. Both the emphasis on plurality of leadership, as well as the

practice of leadership through influence, equipping and empowerment, serve as New Testament ecclesiological examples of decentralization. The final expression to be highlighted in this section will be the process by which decisions were made in the church of the New Testament. This is important to examine, for of the primary characteristics of shared leadership is the manner in which decisions are arrived at in collaborative and equitable manners. Though examples may be found of Paul making individual decisions related to his personal ministry direction (e.g., Acts 20.3, 16; Tit. 3.12), the remarkably consistent theme throughout the New Testament is that decisions related to the church as a whole were made by the congregation as a whole through a process of consensual decision-making. This practice is one of the most robust examples of decentralized shared leadership in the New Testament.

This practice likely flows out of the New Testament understanding of the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2.9), for this theological reality meant that every believer had direct access to God (Heb. 10.19-25). Regarding this, Grudem writes, “All have access directly to God in order to seek to know his will. The New Testament allows for no special class of Christians who have greater access to God than others. Therefore, it is right to include all believers in some of the crucial decision-making processes of the church. ‘In an abundance of counselors there is safety’ (Prov. 11:14)” (933). In order to better understand how consensual decision making was practiced in the New Testament church, examples of this type of decentralization will be examined in the Gospels and the book of Acts.

Within the Gospels, Matthew 18 provides important teaching on how consensual decision-making was to be practiced in the New Testament church. In this chapter, Jesus turns to instructing his disciples (NASB 1) on what to do if a Christian is sinned against by another Christian (15-20). When such situations arise, contemporary church leaders may often run to including themselves in the resolution of this problem. But Jesus counters this wisdom by putting

forward a four-step path of conflict resolution and decision-making that never explicitly involves the leaders in a hierarchal sense of the term. Here are the four steps.

First, the offended Christian goes one-on-one to the person who committed the sin in order to “show him his fault in private” (NASB 15). As Jesus notes, “if he listens...you have won your brother” (NASB 15) back from the error of his way. If this first step does not work, the second step is to, “take one or two more with you” (NASB 16) in order that the accusation, “may be confirmed” (NASB 16). If this second step still does not work, Jesus says the third step is not to take the one who committed the sin to the leaders of the church—as contemporary leaders may often encourage—but rather to the congregation as a whole. Note Jesus’ words on this point: “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church” (NASB 17). Finally, “if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as Gentile and a tax collector” (NASB 17). This fourth step, after walking through the three private and public discussions in which the one who committed the sin has been shown his fault, is a final step of excommunication—the public rejection of this person from participation in the life of the church.

Bilezikian notes of this passage that, “Remarkably, this procedure dispenses totally with an authority structure that manages the life of the congregation from above it. The decision making process is self-contained.” (139). Furthermore, it is important to see in this text that Jesus, “placed the authority to administer the church and to make the decisions that shape its life and affect its constituency squarely on the congregation” (140). Rather than a centralized leader—or even group of leaders—handing down decisions for the congregation on issues of church discipline, in Matthew 18 Jesus emphasizes this decidedly decentralized path for conflict resolution and decision-making in the church of the New Testament.

Within the book of Acts, several examples of consensual decision-making stand out in chapters 6, 13, and 15. In Acts 6.1-7, Luke records that, “a complaint arose on the part of the

Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food” (NASB 1). Rather than the apostles making a decision for the congregation, the apostolic leaders facilitated a process of congregational decision-making. Responding to the complaint, Luke notes that, “the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples” (NASB 2), shared with them a possible path forward, and then allowed the congregation as a whole to exercise their discernment by lending their approval. On this final point, Luke notes that, “The statement found approval with the whole congregation” (NASB 5), and thus the stated plans were acted upon. While plans birthed in isolation often die in isolation, here the process of congregational decision-making resulted in a great work accomplished in their midst: “The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith” (NASB 7).

As a second example of decentralized consensual decision-making in the book of Acts, Acts 13.1-4 records the manner in which Barnabas and Paul were commissioned into Paul’s first missionary journey. Through a gathering of those were, “ministering to the Lord and fasting” (NASB 2), it was discerned among those gathered that the Holy Spirit was leading Barnabas and Paul to be set apart for the work to which God had called them. After commissioning them through the laying on of hands, and through fasting and prayer, the congregation at Syria Antioch, “sent them away” (NASB 3). Interestingly, though Barnabas and Paul were sent out by these Christians, Luke records in the next verse that Barnabas and Paul were, “sent out by the Holy Spirit” (NASB 4). So were they sent out by the Christians in Syria Antioch (3) or by the Holy Spirit (4)? The answer lies in the fact this passage is implicitly teaching that the Holy Spirit confirmed His divine will through the corporate discernment process of consensual decision-making by the congregation. This makes practical sense, for as Jesus said, “where two or three

have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst” (NASB Matt. 18.20).

The final expression of consensual decision-making in the book of Acts is seen in Acts 15. As previously discussed, Acts 15 is focused on the debate that had emerged over how Gentile Christians were to practice their Christianity. First, we see in this passage that Paul and Barnabas went up to Jerusalem through a consensual decision-making process: “*the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem*” (NASB 2, emphasis added). Second, after a time of discussion took place (4-21), Luke records the consensual nature of how next-steps were determined. He writes, “Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, *with the whole church*, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas” (NASB 22, emphasis added). Further indicating the communal dimension to this decision-making process, the letter to be delivered to the Gentile Christians read that, “it *seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us* to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials” (NASB 28, emphasis added), and in so writing confirms yet again the pattern of discerning the guidance of the Spirit of God through a decentralized consensual process of decision-making.

The pattern of consensual decision-making in the New Testament provides yet another example of how “central” the practice of decentralization was in the first century church. Rather than being a peripheral or occasional reality within the structures of the New Testament church, decentralization—expressed through plurality of leadership, leadership influence, equipping, and empowerment, and consensual decision-making—was the normative practice of the church throughout the New Testament.

Reasons for Decentralization in the New Testament

While there are many reasons that led to the practice of decentralized leadership in the New Testament—such as historic, religious, socio-political, and architectural reasons—it’s important to emphasize that decentralized structures were not only passive responses to these

outside influences, but rather they were also proactively derived from important theological beliefs that informed and shaped the practice of leadership in the New Testament church. As referenced in the introduction to this chapter, the theological worldview of the New Testament Christians shaped how they functioned as a church—their beliefs shaped their practice. Toward the end of understanding some of the theological beliefs influencing decentralization in the New Testament church, the following areas will be highlighted: (a) the Christological message, (b) the Trinitarian God, and (c) ecclesiological metaphors.

Christological Message. Just as the synagogue served as a place of meeting for Hebrews in the Diaspora, so the New Testament church placed emphasis on the church dispersed. The Lord Jesus Himself clearly delineates this decentralized agenda to His followers in Matthew 28 and Acts 1: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (NASB Matt. 28.18-19). Further emphasizing the decentralized nature of the religious agenda of Christ, Luke records the following words of Jesus: “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (NASB Acts 1:8). The emphasis on “all the nations” in Matthew 28.19 and the call for witnesses to even “the remotest part of the earth” in Acts 1.8 provides clarity on this point.

While the Abrahamic promise of Genesis 12—God’s promises to Abraham that, “in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (NASB Gen. 12.3)—was in and of itself a call to cross-cultural dispersion of the blessings of God to the nations of the earth, the history of the Hebrew people in the Old Testament does not demonstrate a faithfulness to this decentralized message. However, in Christ, and through the message Christ brought, this Abrahamic promise found a place of fulfillment. The first century Christians embraced Jesus’ teaching on global decentralization, and thus in the book of Acts, the epistles, and the pastoral letters, expressions of

decentralization in the church at the level of ecclesiastical shared leadership are found as an outgrowth of Jesus' teachings on this point.

Trinitarian God. The Bible is robustly Trinitarian. While the doctrine of the Trinity has sometimes taken a peripheral place within theological discussions surrounding its challenging complexities, the witness of the Bible affirms Trinitarian theology at the heart of Christian thinking in the first century church. Identifying the central place of God as Trinity throughout the Bible, Grudem notes that while partial revelation of God as Trinity is found in the Old Testament (e.g., Genesis 1.26; Psalm 110.1; Is. 63.10; Hos. 1.7; Is. 48.16), God as Trinity is more completely revealed in the New Testament (e.g., Matt. 3.16-17; Matt. 28.19; 1 Cor. 12.4-6; 2 Cor. 13.14; Eph. 4.4-6; 1 Pet. 1.2; Jude 20-21). In view of the biblical basis for Trinitarian theology, Grudem argues that the understanding of God as Trinity is centered on three primary affirmations: (a) God is three persons, (b) each person is fully God, and (c) there is one God.

Beyond mere propositional belief however, the theological conviction that God exists within plural-oneness provides a master image to guide Christian engagement with others. On this point, Cladis notes that the understanding of God as Trinity serves as a master image effecting how relationships and community are thought about. Specifically, Cladis draws this out of an image from John of Damascus—a seventh century Greek theologian—who speaks of the Trinitarian persons of God as *perichoresis*—God as Father, Son, and Spirit in a Trinitarian “circle dance.” Of this Cladis writes, “A *perichoretic* image of the Trinity is that of the three persons of God in constant movement in a circle that implies intimacy, equality, unity yet distinction, and love” (4). Understanding God in such Trinitarian image naturally leads to the practice of ecclesiological structures that models the harmonious leadership of God in community.

Discussing some of the implications of the Trinity in reference to life in the church,

Bilezikian notes that all three persons of the Godhead are closely involved together in endowing the church with spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12.4-6). He writes, “The church and its local ministry are important enough in God’s purposes for the whole Trinity to be involved in providing all that is necessary to promote their development” (Bilezikian 165). Not only does God in all His Trinitarian fullness engage in the empowerment and leadership of His church, but Christians who embrace this vision of God begin to model the relational unity of the Godhead in their own communities as well. This was the theological foundation informing leadership in the first century church, and as leadership was decentralized throughout the Godhead, so leadership models in the early church tended toward decentralization as an outgrowth of their Trinitarian theology.

Ecclesiological Metaphors. The New Testament’s Trinitarian view of God naturally led to theological understandings for first century believers that modeled the relational unity of God in the church. One of the ways of seeing this is through the ecclesiological metaphors used in Scripture. The Bible includes many metaphors for the church—metaphors that are not unlike the metaphors used by contemporary students of organizational life (e.g., Morgan; Weick). Some of these biblical metaphors are agricultural in nature, comparing the church to a harvest (e.g., Matt. 13.1-30; John 4.35), an olive tree (Rom. 11.17-24), a field (1 Cor. 3.6-9), and branches on a vine (John 15.1-8). Others metaphors are architectural in nature, comparing the church to a building (1 Cor. 3.9), a house (Heb. 3.6), a spiritual house of living stones (1 Peter. 2.5), and a pillar and support of truth (1 Tim. 3.15). Furthermore, priestly and nationalist metaphors are used, comparing the church to a royal priesthood and a holy nation (1 Pet. 2.9). Each of these ecclesiological metaphors in the New Testament serve as powerful images of how to understand the people of God—the *ekklēsia*.

In light of the emphasis on decentralized forms of shared leadership in this chapter, I will

focus my attention on the two final categories of metaphors used for the church in the New Testament—the familial and corporal metaphors. Both of these metaphors included cues on how shared forms of organizational practice may function. First, the familial metaphors used by the New Testament authors flow out of the Trinitarian God of the New Testament. Within the Trinity, God is seen as both Father and Son—explicit language of the family—and the love exhibited between the Father and the Son by the Spirit displays the intimacy of familial love. On this point, Sittser writes, “God is love because he is, in a mysterious way, a relationship. He is one; yet he exists in three persons. Therefore God is able to love within himself. The Father loves the Son, infinitely and totally, and the Son loves the Father. Thus God is a relationship” (125-126). Perhaps the most intimate picture of the familial love within the Trinitarian God is seen in the prayer of Jesus in John 17.

Based on the familial language of love within the Trinity, it’s understandable why the New Testament authors turned to similar metaphorical language to describe Christians and organizational life within the church. For instance, Paul notes that God, “predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself” (NASB Eph. 1.5), and that we, “have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but...have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’” (NASB Rom. 8.15). As adopted children in the family of God, Christians are able to come to the Father with intimacy that is similar to that which is seen between the Father and the Son in John 17. Rather than God limiting His familial love within the Trinity, driven by His character He disseminates His love to His adopted children.

Furthermore, not only do followers of Christ become children of God from this familial perspective, but within the ecclesiological metaphors of the New Testament they also become family to each other within the church. In 1 John 3.14-18, instruction is given, “to lay down our lives for the brethren,” (NASB) for by our familial love for fellow children of God we find

assurance that we too are children of God. Similarly, Jesus made a point to say that it was those who do the will of the Father who are brothers and sisters within His family (Matt. 12.50). As children of God who are fellow family members with those who follow Jesus, the New Testament authors paint a rich metaphor of shared corporate life together in the Family of God—a rich corporate life that extends while beyond priestly leaders who serve a centralized role of representing others before God.

Second, the New Testament authors used metaphors that were corporal in nature. Of this, Schreiner writes, “The most famous metaphor for the church in Pauline writings is the ‘body of Christ’” (335). While the origins of this metaphor have fascinated scholars (e.g., Dunn; Schreiner), it’s power in communicating New Testament theology about the church is much more important than coming to a final answer on its origin. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses the metaphor of a body to explain both the unity of the church as well as the importance of every member of the church. Regarding unity, Paul writes, “all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body” (NASB 1 Cor. 12.12). In Paul’s writing, he uses the unity of the physical body to explain the unity of the body of Christ—the church.

Regarding the use of the body metaphor as a means of communicating the importance of every member of the church, Paul writes, “the body is not one member, but many” (NASB 1 Cor. 12.14), and therefore, for instance, “the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’” (NASB 12.21). Rather, just as every part of the body is needed—especially the unseen parts like the vital organs that are internally located within the body—so every member of the church serves a vital role. In light of the theme of decentralization, this metaphor illustrates the belief and desire of the New Testament church to have the every member of the engaged and participating in its life. Such beliefs have led many to support structures of congregationally led communities. Rather than a centralization of the responsibilities in the life of the church, the

corporal metaphor emphasizes the theological belief of first century Christians that every person was to work according to the gifts given them by the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 12.1-31; Rom. 12.4-8). Just as the Trinitarian God models decentralization, so the corporal metaphor mirrors this by emphasizing the theological belief in a decentralized ecclesiology.

To the extent that these biblical expressions of decentralization were effective in the first century church, and to the extent that decentralization is an expression of the very Trinitarian character of God, contemporary leaders would be wise to learn from these practices as their own worldviews are shaped by Scripture. In the following section the topic of how decentralized practices of shared leadership may be applied in the organizations of this day will be discussed.

Decentralization and the Contemporary Organizations

Having provided discussion around both the expressions of and reasons for decentralized practices of shared leadership in the New Testament, this section is now devoted to looking at the benefits associated with the implementation and practice of shared-forms of leadership in the contemporary organization. Introducing the importance of this theme, Johnson notes that shared leadership may be a key ingredient to the success of learning organizations in the future knowledge society. For leaders and organizations considering transitions to models of shared leadership for the future of their organizations, it's important to remember that context is a key moderating variable. For instance, Bass notes that centralization or decentralization may be a consequence rather than a cause at times (584). Blau's research investigating 250 governmental agencies supports this assertion. Blau found that agencies with highly qualified personnel had a higher presence of decentralization than agencies with poorly qualified personnel. In contrast to this, agencies where work was more automated or where personnel had lower qualifications, there was a higher presence of hierarchal systems characteristic of centralized structures. In both cases, context provided an important moderating variable.

Beyond considering context, organizational leaders will also want to attend to additional variables that help to enable transitions. On this point, Merkens and Spencer identify five primary factors that were necessary for one organization's transition to models of shared leadership. These factors are preparation, guidance, much thought, commitment, and patience. In light of the unfamiliarity that many organizations have with shared leadership practices, these factors identified by Merkens and Spencer do not come as a surprise.

While Bass' above-noted comment on decentralization as a consequence rather than a cause is well noted, there are encouraging markers in the literature that support the value of shared leadership practice. For instances, Ensley, Pearson, and Pearce argue that shared leadership serves as an important antecedent for the process variables of cohesion and a collective vision, and that these process variables are important antecedents of new venture performance. Thus, shared leadership may positively effect new venture performance as mediated by cohesion and a collective vision (329). Additionally, Perry, Pearce, and Sims argue that shared leadership is key to the concept of empowered selling teams in the context of sales management (35).

Further arguing for the benefits of shared leadership, Coluccio and Havlick note that shared leadership was one of the primarily factors leading to the successful merger of two healthcare competitors. In this context, shared leadership was manifest by a shared mission statement, defined core values, and the establishment of guiding principles (36). Furthermore, Decker found—in examining the role of shared leadership in an educational context—that positive correlations exist between a collaborative/shared leadership approach and satisfaction of an educational technology plan. Decker also found that when stakeholders have an opportunity for input they have a higher degree of satisfaction (2). Both of these consequences hold great promise and hope for organizations.

As a practical example of a form of shared-leadership, many organizations are turning to the utilization of self-led or self-managed teams in order to reduce expenses associated with mid-level management. On the utility of self-managed teams, Bass writes, “Increasingly, project teams are being formed with informal leadership in which no one member is appointed as leader. Rather, power is fully shared in planning, operations, and control” (272). Yang and Shao serve as example of this emerging interest. In their research they applied a competing values approach to the study of shared leadership in the context of self-managed teams, and found that effective self-managed teams play and balance eight competing roles (521). Again, while there is a place for more autocratic forms of organizational leadership, allowing competing voices to provide their input at multiple levels general makes for better decisions and outcomes within the organization.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter the author has sought to provide a general overview of decentralized forms of shared leadership by (a) providing an analysis of the literature on decentralized forms of shared leadership and their place in the broader literature of leadership studies, (b) examining the New Testament for examples of and reasons for decentralized forms of shared leadership practice, and (c) addressing several benefits available to organizations implementing decentralized forms of shared-leadership. While decentralized leadership practices may not serve the needs of every organization, the use of such shared leadership styles from the churches of antiquity to the organizations of today provide historical-contemporary support for a more widespread openness to shared leadership practice. Perhaps this chapter will provide just the impetus needed for today’s organizational leaders to make the next step toward the benefits of decentralized forms of shared leadership in their communities.

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