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LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION FROM MATTHEW'S GOSPEL:
PASSING THE BATON OF LEADERSHIP TO THE NEXT GENERATION

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Abstract

This article examines Matthew's Gospel drawing from social and cultural texture analysis to discover principles of biblical leadership succession applicable for all leadership succession today. The paper provides a summary of the principles, including: (a) leadership succession starts with honorable leaders, (b) leadership succession is an ongoing process from generation to generation, (c) leadership succession is a family affair, (d) leadership succession focuses on Christ's authority with leaders as His agents, and (e) leadership succession is action oriented. From the discovered principles, this paper infers five Christian ethical responses for all organizational leadership. These responses are: (a) leadership succession begins with a leader's honor, and then reveals itself in the leader's life, (b) leadership succession is a continual process for the best interest of the organization, (c) leadership succession flows from the organization's values and people, (d) leadership succession serves organizational values, and (e) leadership succession is an actionable event, not a good intention. Finally, this paper challenges the reader to be an honorable leader.

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Introduction

This article contends Matthew's Gospel provides a biblical leadership succession template for churches and, by implication, all organizations. Matthew draws on rhetorical tools used in his day to set an overarching theme of leadership succession within the context of Jesus' new countercultural family of God. Matthew completes his theme presenting an honorable Jesus entrusting His disciples with the ongoing leadership succession of His church. From this investigation, five biblical leadership succession principles emerge: (a) leadership succession starts with honorable leaders, (b) leadership succession is an ongoing process from generation to generation, (c) leadership succession is a fictive family affair, (d) leadership succession focuses on Christ's authority with leaders as His agents, and (e) leadership succession is action oriented.

From the discovered principles, this paper will infer five Christian ethical responses for all organizational leadership. These responses are: (a) leadership succession begins with a leader's honor, and then reveals itself in the leader's life, (b) leadership succession is a continual process for the best interest of the organization, (c) leadership succession flows from the organization's values and people, (d) leadership succession serves organizational values, and (e) leadership succession is an actionable event, not just a good intention. Finally, this paper challenges the reader to be an honorable leader.

Matthew's Audience

Matthew's gospel addresses the concerns of an increasingly diverse early Christian community, which needed empowerment to withstand spiritual opponents pressuring them to conform to the surrounding dominant cultures.¹ According to some authors, Matthew wrote his Gospel to his church and others facing similar concerns.² He wrote to Jews and Gentiles who were, in part, introduced to Christ by the disciples Christ spoke to in Matthew 28.³ Matthew wrote to believers immersed in a counterculture within the dominant Roman culture,⁴ presenting Christ as honorable. Matthew presented Christ redefining standards of purity and holiness⁵ – focusing attention away from external issues to internal issue of the heart.⁶ Matthew depicted Christ as comfortable with a diverse audience, remaining uninfluenced by the dominant cultural norms, while living a life of an honorable person.

Leadership Succession from Matthew's Rhetorical Tools

Among other rhetorical tools, Matthew uses a first-century cultural literary device, an encomium – a rhetorical tool used to prove a person as honorable by telling their life story from birth to death.⁷ Matthew uses this specific cultural rhetorical structure to communicate that Jesus lived as an honorable man. His tactic shows Jesus as one who was in a perfect patron-client relation with His Father and from that relationship, the chosen one to assume a mediator-broker role with absolute authority.⁸ Matthew fixes Christ's honor by opening with Jesus' genealogy showing a well-known and honored heritage. Matthew then builds Christ's honor through stories of a life of honor. Finally, Matthew provides a picture of Christ's life ending with an honorable

death. From Matthew's encomium, this paper infers the following "overarching" biblical leadership succession principle:

Biblical leadership succession flows out of the core of a leader's honorable life demonstrated by respect for past generations, a daily commitment to God's purposes, and determination to transfer leadership to the next generation.

Matthew's next rhetorical tool is an *inclusió*, which is a first century cultural literary device to signal an intended theme within a body of text. An *inclusió* links a topic at the beginning of a body of text with a similar topic at the end of the subject text to signal "a literary envelope" with an enveloped theme.⁹ Matthew's first use of the *inclusió* provides a theme of God's continued plan of leadership succession. McKenna argues that Matthew opens with the genealogy of Jesus to provide a picture of generations of "anointed [leadership] continuity"¹⁰ – that is, leadership passing from one generation to the next. This paper agrees with McKenna and argues Matthew's picture of leadership passing to the next generation provides a textual opening for Matthew's first *inclusió* dealing with Jesus' leadership succession.

With that picture of past succession, Matthew closes his leadership succession *inclusió* with Christ's last commission – His passing of leadership to His disciples.¹¹ This *inclusió* identifies a theme of leadership succession within Matthew's practical action-based message. Matthew gives the opening story of Christ's past heritage; the central theme of Christ's choosing and developing His disciples; and Christ's passing the leadership legacy to His disciples. From Matthew's *inclusió*, this paper infers the following biblical leadership succession principle:

1. Biblical leadership succession is not a one-time event. It is continuous progression of honoring a heritage, engaging the present, and passing a legacy into the future.

Matthew's second *inclusió* provides a theme of God's continuous presence with His church. Matthew opens this *inclusió* with his intertexture insert of Isaiah 7:14¹² with the message of "Immanuel" or "God with us." He then closes the *inclusió* with Christ's words in Matthew 28:20b¹³ that He will be with us "always." These *inclusió* book ends provide the theme of "God with us" always and in all situations. From Matthew's second *inclusió*, this paper infers a biblical leadership succession principle:

2. Biblical leadership succession is not an autonomous event; it develops out of Christ's abiding presence in the family of God.

Matthew's third *inclusió* provides a theme of Christ's absolute authority. Matthew opens this *inclusió* in 2:6¹⁴ quoting Herod's chief priests and scribes answering Herod's question about Christ's birthplace; they drew their answer from Micah 5:2,¹⁵ Micah's prophecy of Christ as ruler coming from Bethlehem. Matthew 28:18 provides the closing *inclusió* text in Christ's claim for authority, to set the theme in Matthew of Christ's authority over all creation. Christ kept His authority, in contrast to delegating His authority, placing His disciples in a regency relationship, with Christ still the King. From Matthew's third *inclusió*, this paper infers a biblical leadership succession principle:

3. Biblical leadership succession is not a leader-centered event; it occurs within Christ's authority over all creation and the regency role of leaders.

Leadership Succession from Matthew 28:18-20

In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus entrusted the leadership succession of His church to His eleven disciples with directions about how to accomplish their task. Jesus picked each of these men, taught them, modeled leadership to them, gave them leadership experiences, and lived with them for the years before His death. These are the future leaders Jesus intends to use to build His church. They are the fruit of Jesus' succession plan.

Christ began His mountaintop commissioning of His eleven disciples by stating His authority over all that exists in heaven and earth. He does not place any limit on the boundaries of His authority, nor does He offer any exceptions, nor is there any expiration date. In contrast to Christ, the teachers of the dominant culture taught their devoted disciples with the understanding that their disciples would eventually become teachers with their own following of devotees.

In the Christ-disciple relationship, Christ kept authority forever, assigning the disciples the role of teaching others about Him and His commands,¹⁶ in contrast to the disciples teaching what they themselves think, believe, and know. This puts the leadership role of the disciples as a regency role – that of acting as a representative of the King. It is from His position as Lord with continuing authority that Jesus says “go!”

Christ told them to “go,” which is an outcome of Christ's authority and of Christ's relational statement that he will be with them always. Because of His continuous presence, it could translate as “go with me.” Some authors argue that “go” literally means “while you are going”,¹⁷ but that should in no way imply that “going” is a casual event. Rather, “going” carries a “continuous” nature in which making disciples represents something disciples do continually.¹⁸

Christ's commissioning centers on a critical verb, “make disciples” – a single word, not two words.¹⁹ Making disciples is not a suggestion; it is a command, the only one in the commission.²⁰ Wilkins argues when Jesus told His disciples to “make disciples,” Jesus meant that His disciples should replicate themselves.²¹ He proposes Matthew's Gospel teaches that Jesus had put years into developing His successors and Jesus wanted His disciples to do in others what He had done in them.²²

Christ told His disciples to baptize – bring those they are discipling to a point of fully identifying with and falling under the lordship of Jesus.²³ This paper argues that baptism reflects a type of kenosis, a step of publicly announcing the decision to be emptied of self for Christ. The underlying motivator will be a sacrificial devotion to Christ flowing from a heart of love for Him.

Christ told His disciples to “teach.” Inferred from the next two participles, Jesus intended for His disciples to teach more than just cognitive information. He intended for them to teach His commandments and to model and coach the active practice of living in Christ. In leadership development and succession, Christ calls leaders to intentionally teach and develop the next generation.

Christ told His disciples to teach others to observe (live in a manner consistent with Christ's guidance). Jesus did not tell His disciples to teach just Christ's commandments which would be orthodoxy.²⁴ He told them to teach the nations to carry out His commands in His way – a matter of orthopraxis.²⁵ In Christian leadership succession, life in Christ becomes a heart and

action issue in which Christ calls leaders to teach the next generation to do continuously what Christ is telling them.

Christ told them to teach others to observe everything He has commanded. In leadership development and succession, Christ calls leaders to focus their teaching on Christ's instruction to His people. Leadership succession and development must focus on life changing obedience to what Christ commands, in contrast to following personal whims.

In Matthew's final attributed speech of Jesus, he records Christ's message of action – "make disciples." Matthew also records Christ giving His disciples directions on how to accomplish His command. In Jesus' message to His eleven disciples, He entrusted them with action steps to make disciples or, as Wilkins argues, replicate them. From Matthew 28:18-20, this paper infers the principle:

Biblical leadership succession must go beyond just good intentions; it must be real-time action based.

Challenge

Matthew wrote in a style consistent with Greek rhetoric of his day, using rhetorical tools familiar to his readers. This paper examines four of Matthew's culturally relevant rhetorical tools plus Matthew's record of Jesus' final commission of His disciples. From that examination, this paper offers five principles relevant to biblical leadership succession:²⁶

- (a) Biblical leadership succession flows out of a foundation of a leader's life of honor, demonstrated by respect for past generations, a daily commitment to God's purposes, and determination to transfer leadership to the next generation.
- (b) Biblical leadership succession is not a one-time event. It is continuous progression of honoring a heritage, engaging the present, and passing a legacy into the future.
- (c) Biblical leadership succession is not an autonomous event; it develops out of Christ's abiding presence in the family of God.
- (d) Biblical leadership succession is not a leader-centered event; it occurs within Christ's authority over all creation and the regency role of leaders.
- (e) Biblical leadership succession must go beyond just good intentions; it must be real-time action based.

Extracting from Matthew's use of an encomium to establish an overarching theme of honor in Christ's leadership, this paper argues that honor overarches leadership today for all organizational leaders, including but not limited to religious, business, government, or education. With leadership honor in mind, the above five biblical principles suggest five Christian ethical responses applicable to any organizational leadership succession:

- (a) Organizational leadership must begin from individual honor, revealed in the leader's recognition of the organization's heritage, a focus on organizational purposes, and a commitment to developing the next generation of leaders.
- (b) Organizational leadership succession is not a single event; it is continuous leadership for the good of the organization and its people.
- (c) Organizational leadership succession is an event of the whole organization, born out of organization's values and people.
- (d) Organizational leadership succession draws the focus away from leadership and onto the values of the organization and leadership's responsibility to support those values.
- (e) Organizational leadership succession must flow from action, in contrast to just issuing promises or good intentions.

Matthew frames leadership succession as a critical deliverable for all organizations. If followed, it may provide a plum line to evaluate leadership and leadership activities. Matthew's picture may assure a smoother continuity for organizations during times of transition and chaos. The question all leaders need to answer is, "Am I going to be an honorable leader?"

This article only touches the surface of the potential lessons available from Matthew's Gospel on leadership succession. An excellent research project would be to discover a leadership development strategy out of the actual leadership activities Jesus used in His development of His disciples.

¹ David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 236, 279.

² Matthew E. Carlton, *The Translator's Reference Translation of the Gospel of Matthew* (Dallas, TX: SIL, 2001), xii.

Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 5-10.

Edgar Krentz, "'Make Disciples': Matthew on Evangelism." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 33, no.1 (2006): 23-41, ATLA Religion, 5 Jan. 2007 <http://firstsearch.oclc.org.eres.regent.edu:2048> (accessed Jan.5, 2007), 23.

Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 8-11.

DeSilva, 234-239.

³ Krentz, 25, 26.

Stephen Westerholm, *Understanding Matthew: The Early Christian Worldview of the First Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 124.

⁴ Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1996), 86-87.

⁵ Jerome H. Neyrey, *Render to God: New Testament Understandings of the Divine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 256-260.

⁶ Neyrey, 78-81.

⁷ Neyrey, 90.

⁸ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992), 168-169.

⁹ D. A. Carson, *God With Us: Themes From Matthew* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1985), 37.

¹⁰ David L. McKenna, *The Leader's Legacy* (Newberg, OR: Barclay, 2006), xi.

¹¹ Matthew 29:16-20.

¹² "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel." (NASB)

¹³ "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

¹⁴ "And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, Are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; For out of you shall come forth a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel."

¹⁵ "But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel."

¹⁶ Paul Hertig, "The Great Commission Revisited: The Role of God's Reign in Disciple Making" *Missiology* 29 (2001): 343-353, ATLA Religion, <http://firstsearch.oclc.org.eres.regent.edu:2048> (accessed February 3, 2007), 347.

¹⁷ Gundry, 595.

¹⁸ Krentz, 29.

¹⁹ Carlton, 331.

²⁰ Krentz, 30.

²¹ Michael J. Wilkins, *Discipleship in the Ancient World and Matthew's Gospel* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 162.

²² Wilkins, 160-163.

²³ Krentz, 34.

²⁴ Mortimer Arias, "Rethinking the Great Commission," *Theology Today* (January 1991): 410-418, under "Great Commission," <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jan1991/v47-4-thechurchintheworld.htm> (accessed January 1, 2009), 412.

²⁵ Arias, 412.

²⁶

Biblical Principle	Christian Ethical Response to Succession
a. Biblical leadership succession flows out of the core of a leader's honorable life demonstrated by respect for past generations, a daily commitment to God's purposes, and determination to transfer leadership to the next generation.	a. Organizational leadership must begin from individual honor, revealed in the leader's recognition of the organization's heritage, a focus on organizational purposes, and a commitment to developing the next generation of leaders.
b. Biblical leadership succession is not a one-time event. It is continuous progression of honoring a heritage, engaging the present, and passing a legacy into the future.	b. Organizational leadership succession is not a single event; it is continuous leadership for the good of the organization and its people.
c. Biblical leadership succession is not an autonomous event; it develops out of Christ's abiding presence in the family of God.	c. Organizational leadership succession is an event of the whole organization, born out of organization's values and people.
d. Biblical leadership succession is not a leader-centered event; it occurs within Christ's authority over all creation and the regency role of leaders.	d. Organizational leadership succession draws the focus away from leadership and onto the values of the organization and leadership's responsibility to support those values.
e. Biblical leadership succession must go beyond just good intentions; it must be real-time action based.	e. Organizational leadership succession must flow from action, in contrast to just issuing promises or good intentions.