

Research Article

Christian Leadership: Cultivating Humility and Brokenness of Christ in a Shame-honour Culture

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Abstract

Christian leadership within the shame and honour cultures faces different challenges, including the pressures and expectations of groups, social circles and the society at large. It is in this context that many Christian leaders often fall short of embracing the humility, brokenness and self-sacrificing life of Christ. The honour-shame cultures in the African context place a leader at the centre of proving their worth, being seen as strong and exhibiting power in order to receive praise over Christ's humility and Christian values. With the contextual understanding of South Sudan and beyond, this article focuses on the issues that continue to place Christian leaders at the crossroads in the shame and honour cultures, mostly against the true power of the Gospel. The article provides an argument that the cultural expectations of status, power and prestige, often driven by societal beliefs, conflict with the biblical model of leadership that is rooted in humility, brokenness, and servanthood. Drawing from the biblical examples and text, the study argues that the cruciform character of Christ, especially his humility, embrace of shame and vulnerability, offers a transformative paradigm for Christian leadership. This transformative paradigm calls for the embrace of true honour in Christ, the embrace of the power of the Gospel that is rooted in the humility of Christ, suffering and brokenness of a Christian servant, imitating Christ to gain the grace of God. Practical implications for Christian leaders in South Sudan and similar settings are discussed with emphasis on the work of sacrificial love, servanthood and not conforming to the tribal, social circles, or societal alliances over the cross, which is our symbol of suffering and grace in Christ Jesus. We must reshape our cultural expectations with the true Gospel and not relent to any social group's pressures but stand firm, following Jesus' footsteps, bearing the true fruits of the Spirit to the very end.

Keywords

Christian Leadership, Shame-honour Culture, Christ, Humility, Brokenness, Gospel

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Christian leadership is one of the critical roles for many, and often leaders face challenges in the ministry especially those appealing to one's culture, tradition, or societal beliefs.

In most parts of the world, if not all, the society and cultural environment shape how Christianity is embraced and subsequently the formation of the Christian identity. The cultural environments differ from one society to another, depending on the traits and characters. In many societies, particularly in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, the shame-honour cultural

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framework profoundly shapes interpersonal relationships, leadership dynamics, and community expectations. The societal expectations and group dynamics often shape the interpersonal activities and, at times, decisions, including in faith and ministry activities. In such contexts, honour is often seen as a public virtue, mostly in fulfilment of groups or communal expectations, whereas shame is regarded as failure to rise to expectations of society, bringing a social death and placing the person in a low status until they prove their worth to be honoured by society and redeemed from shame. This cultural lens presents both a challenge and an opportunity for Christian leadership, which is rooted not in self-exaltation to meet the expectations but in the humility and brokenness of Christ, which is central to faith. [1, 3-5, 13].

This article explores how Christian leaders can embody the cruciform character of Christ in shame-honour cultures, transforming leadership into a redemptive and healing vocation while cultivating the fruits of the Holy Spirit and remaining faithfully committed to the Gospel mission in challenging situations. It stems from the initial analysis on the church's struggles in South Sudan and Africa at large in coping with the cultures in a collective society and preaching the Gospel of Christ, imitating his humility, brokenness and faith in the midst of communal challenges. The article explores the question of how Christian leaders would live up to the Christian values, embracing humility and brokenness in the face of cultural appropriateness without feeling the burden of isolation or losing face in the communities they live in. [2, 8] It provides both answers to these complex challenges Christian leaders face in the shame-honour culture and also explores critical questions on the influence of societal beliefs in the modern church. This article is not in any way providing the whole discussion of the topic but shall comprehensively address the critical areas related to leadership by delving into the biblical understanding, spirituality of Christian leadership, and the faith identity as a Christian measure of value.

1.2. Methodology

The article employed an exploratory approach with an exegetical lens of the biblical context, coupled with a missiological approach in understanding God's mission among the cultures and the Christian leadership as a mission-oriented task to Christians in a world infested with cultures and traditions that continue to shape the leaders.

2. Understanding Shame-honour Culture in the Context of South Sudan

2.1. Defining the Shame-honour Culture

It is important to explore this topic with the context involved, such as Africa and specifically South Sudan. "Honor and shame are a socio-theological reality that affects all facets

of biblical mission. God's people must discern how to embody and proclaim God's saving honour in particular contexts." This is true in the sense that the shame and honour culture prioritizes the societal level of honour over personal convictions and beliefs, communal perceptions and status over individual decisions and plans. In a cultural context like South Sudan, honour is gained through group or community-recognized achievements, respected lineage, and loyalty, as well as public recognition where necessary. Conversely, shame is a loss of face, often resulting in exclusion or dishonour to one's family or community. It is in this situation that Christian leaders often find themselves at the crossroads between the culture that has its unwritten rules and the Christian leadership that calls for cultivating the humility of Christ and cherishing his brokenness in faith throughout the ministry. Christian leaders could easily fall out here in pursuit of prestige, honour and communal praise as strong, untouchable, and above all, doing everything expected of them by their circles, groups, or communities, irrespective of what the true biblical doctrine says. These are the hypocritical practices (seven woes) that Jesus rebukes the teachers of the law and Pharisees for during his teaching, cautioning his disciples from pursuing greatness that "those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves, will be exalted" (Matthew 23). [1, 2, 8, 13].

2.2. Understanding the Biblical Model in a Cross-cultural Environment

The cultural expectation often conflicts with the biblical model of leadership and Christian mission as exemplified by Jesus Christ. It is always the role of a Christian leader to embrace the biblical model, imitating Christ in their faith and trusting in his [Christ] leadership, rather than aligning with the expectations of the culturally infused beliefs. This way, the vision for the ministry will be achieved, and the communities will be transformed into a community of believers whose actions transcend the culturally appropriate honour and social status.

"The vision essential for cross-cultural leadership is based on an understanding of what the Scriptures teach of the kingdom of God and the vision that flows out of the power of the Holy Spirit to establish that kingdom now and in the ages to come. The Isaiah text, read by Jesus in his hometown, proclaims freedom for prisoners, sight for the blind, and release from oppression." [2].

By following and imitating Christ, one would understand that Jesus did not bow to the tradition and culture of men to gain honour and status, but to his faith and belief in what is true and holy. Through the proclamation Jesus made to free the prisoners and give sight to the blind, he was clear about the bondage that the people were in – culturally bound to the beliefs of human statuses and honour, which do not make anyone holy to attain the grace of God. In his quest to free mankind, he embraced shame and rejection to redeem hu-

manity from the bondage of cultures and practices that had separated us from God. “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 3: 6) There is no longer a separation, status, honour, and shame; it is only the humble Christ that has become our honour, not human expectations and beliefs.[6, 8].

3. The Humility of Christ: A Counter-cultural Model to Shame

3.1. The Cross and the Culture

The cross symbolizes an ultimate shame in the Roman world, where criminals, slaves, and outcasts were punished or humiliated. Jesus, in his mission to redeem mankind from shame and rejection, took our shame to the cross, accepting to be humiliated, criminalized, and crucified as an outcast at Golgotha. This move through faith in God becomes the paradoxical emblem of divine honour and the victory that the Christians enjoys today. It is this reason that Paul offered a foundational text to Christians and especially the leaders in any culture, as recorded in Philippians 2: 5–11:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In this passage, we understand that Christ’s humility transcended the cultural measure of honour of the time, choosing shame in the face of adversity only to emerge with glory and victory. He chooses shame over personal prestige and power, taking his human vulnerability, to be glorified in the Kingdom of God and not that of men. From servant to crucified—redefines honour in the biblical model and therefore provides the foundation for cultivating the true honour that is in humility and brokenness, not in community praises, toughness, or blind honour that has no future in Christ. His humility was not weakness but strength under control. His brokenness was not defeat but the pathway to resurrection. In shame-honour cultures, this model challenges leaders to embrace vulnerability, servanthood, and sacrificial love as the true marks of honour.

One can only gain greater heights by losing their pride, superficial honours and prestige. [6, 8, 10, 12].

3.2. Embracing the Honour of Christ

It is never too late to realize that, as a leader, who has fallen short of the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ, there is still time to reembar on the right path when your personal convictions and Holy Spirit touches your heart. This comes by embracing his teachings, imitating his unbroken humility, displaying the true character of his strength through brokenness, even at the very brink of calamities. This is not only in fulfilment of the mission that Christ came for, but a total embrace of the values of the Kingdom of God, living by the principles Jesus taught in the beatitudes (Matthew 5) to always abide by, rejoicing at the face of adversity for “great is your reward in heaven.” One must continue to bear fruits in Christ, noting that, the salt should never lose its saltiness, nor should a light be hidden.

Every leader who lives by these principles and values, despite being surrounded by a multitude of friends, circles, and society that want them to pursue the agenda of societal praises and honour, would always choose the honour of Christ despite the human shame and brokenness that comes with it. A true leader is honoured not for standing with his people simply because they want honour and praise, but for the truth, despite being left alone. For true honour rests with Christ, the ultimate redeemer, not with the heathen. This is why Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7: 21).[1, 6-8, 10, 12].

4. Brokenness as Redemptive Leadership

Leadership is often a complex but rewarding role once embraced with humility, availability, and character shaped by the realities of life. Martin Luther, in his quest to challenge the Papal leadership over what he deemed as unbiblical and sinful, played most of his role, albeit in situations of weakness and brokenness due to the Papal excommunication and Imperial ban as a wanted criminal. He persevered not by denying the facts of the situation he faced but by acknowledging and using them to advance his efforts through adapting to the new realities to achieve the intended goals. This effort would later transform the whole of Protestantism and the church on a global scale. Broken leadership is not about being crushed or rendered ineffective, but about being aware of one’s limitations and, through ultimate submission to God, being dependent on his grace to achieve the intended goals. [1, 6, 7].

Leaders who have walked through suffering, failure, or rejection often carry a deeper empathy and spiritual authority depending on how they acknowledge and own the situation. In a shame-honour culture, weakness or brokenness is often hidden or not acknowledged as showing some limitations due to the perception of the society or perhaps the group’s ideo-

logies. In such a situation, the true leadership qualities would emerge from a spiritual leader. Martin Luther took a critical position during his most broken situation of Papal excommunication and Imperial ban. It was not based on personal ego or group influence, but a true reflection of a spiritual leader who has deeper empathy, standing by the true values of Christ by rejecting and condemning the revolt against the very authorities that made him a shameful person in the face of the public.[1, 7, 10, 11].

Brokenness often becomes a prophetic witness to the power of God working through human frailty, especially when embraced with wisdom, understanding and submitting to the graceful will of God. Shame did not start in today's collective cultures but in the beginning. In Genesis, we read that Adam and Eve, despite being naked, were not ashamed or feeling any disgrace (Gen 2: 25) until they disobeyed God, then shame entered the human story, followed by accusations, blame games, and evil intentions that eroded trust, marred leadership qualities and character (Gen 3: 6–19). This is why the human race needed God's redemption to wash away shame and restore honour through his grace. It is in this regard that true Christian leaders always embrace brokenness and weakness, accepting the human shame while leaning on God for his grace.

In 2 Corinthians 12: 9; Paul the Apostle, who was once a tormentor of faith and has become tormented himself, declared the message of God that, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul was in prison for the sake of Christ's gospel, and having accepted his fate, he used his position of weakness to send out pastoral letters to several churches and Christian leaders to keep the fire burning despite the torment that come their way. This paradox of brokenness and leading from weakness invites Christian leaders and churches to lead not from a pedestal of perfection but from the valley of grace. It is in brokenness that leaders become approachable, authentic, and transformational through the Gospel of Christ.[1, 6-8, 10, 12].

5. Reimagining Honour as Service in Christian Leadership

5.1. Servant and the Master

Christian leadership reimagine honour not as status, pride or privilege but as service endowed with compassion, humility and kindness, bearing the true fruits of the Holy Spirit. During his mission, approaching the last days of his teaching on earth, Jesus symbolically washed the feet of his disciples, displaying the role of leadership as service rather than being served; in doing so, he redefined greatness as humility and honour as obedience to the Father. He stated it to the disciples that "I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he

who sent him". (John 13: 1-17).

In this example and as explained by Christ as Christian leaders, no one should boast or raise ego to portray the untouchable boss life; our role is a service on behalf of the master, we are sent to proclaim the good news of Christ and invite people to his Kingdom through the help of Holy Spirit. Every Christian Leader should be a servant, showing the trait of humility, compassion, and always offering service that Christ called him or her for, not a tribalist, conflict stirrer, or ego-driven person who believes in the honours of society. We must be true believers who cultivates the ultimate honour of Christ through service in humility and brokenness. [9, 10, 12].

5.2. Christian Service in Shame-honour Culture

In shame-honour cultures, leaders are often expected to maintain distance, command respect, and avoid public vulnerability or anything that will display a lost face, especially within their circles, groups, and the society at large. This is what drives most of the leaders today, and some of the Christian leaders are no exception, especially when the resources and communities are involved. The human instinct is always to feel overpowering, be seen as untouchable, or exert their will over others to feel honoured and respected within circles and beyond. [9] However, Christian leaders are called to draw near to Christ, imitate his humility and brokenness, to walk with the broken, the poor, and the despised, sharing in their shame and challenges, not seeking people's honour and attention. "Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1: 26-27).

In the real world, honour is found not in inflicting pain or exerting one's will over others, but a good service and a legacy that would be remembered, a seed planted and grown to continue that legacy and display the sincerity of the work. As Greenleaf discussed, servanthood is a critical journey that reflects the role an individual plays in other people's lives. It "manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served." [10] This is where the true honour is cultivated as God's grace upon his servants leads to blessings.

6. Practical Implications: A Journey to Servanthood in South Sudan and Similar Contexts

6.1. Lust for Power and Its Implications

In every journey, there are implications, perhaps some milestones to achieve, or practical steps to take in order to arrive at a particular stage. The cultivation of humility and

brokenness is a process that a Christian must achieve, reflecting on the life and teaching of Christ, being the servant-leader that the church needs to lead and not lusting after power or the cheerful honours of a crowd that do not have a significant in the Kingdom of God. "The lust for power corrupts the human spirit, damages relationships, perverts institutions, calcifies religions, destroys nature, entrenches inequalities, multiplies wars, and leads to all kinds of evil." [11] It is never healthy to lead any institution, let alone the Church, through the lust for power and control, but through humility. The biblical example of King Saul, provide the right context to how the power corrupt human spirit, especially when one values human perceptions, honour and personal gains over obedience and service to the Lord. Being obedience and following the Lord's instructions is the main honour of a true servant, for "to obey is better than sacrifice.... for rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry" (1 Samuel 15: 22-23). This is the reason why God rejected Saul for failing to stand in accordance with the lord's instruction but rather on the societal honours and his public reputation.

In contexts like South Sudan, where communal identity, tribal or societal honours, and public reputation are deeply the defining factors for leadership reputation and command of respect, Christian leadership suffers a great deal, which often slips off the ladder of Christian values. Christian leaders are likely to find it hard to navigate the compass of culture, faith and the ministry as often the power dynamics make many complicit and surrender to the societal demands over faith and the values of the Kingdom. These dynamics are not new; in Matthew 20: 20-28, the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to ask for elevation of her sons to positions of power, in order to gain the respect, they thought they deserve. Jesus took it seriously and warned the disciples against the lust for power and urged them to embrace humility, servanthood, and leading from powerlessness as measure of gaining greater glory.

6.2. Embracing the Power of the Gospel

Christian leaders must navigate the expectations from the social groups, tribal communities, or society at large, bearing in mind the kingdom of God as the ultimate price, not people's acceptance. Jesus categorically pointed us to the truth, we are not of this world, for we are a chosen nation, a reason the world will hate us and the Kingdom values unless it is done the world's way and we miss the glory of God. "Remember what I told you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also" (John 15: 20).

The Christian leaders must therefore embrace powerlessness, servanthood and humility as virtues of the Kingdom, imitating Christ in teaching and leading as Christ sent. By doing so, the humble embrace of powerlessness will result in the ultimate healing of the Church and community, leading up to the healing of the nation. Servant leaders will rise beyond

the tribal and societal challenge of honour and embrace vulnerability and powerlessness as the mode operandi for Christian ministry to gain a greater honour in Christ Jesus. This will ensure that, the church moves away from being seen complicit in tribal and ethnic feuds or political involvement and embrace the power of Gospel that transcend above all the earthly divisions and cultures.

There is power in the gospel and in Christ. But it is a power the world does not often understand. In weakness, foolishness, and vulnerability we discover a world-transforming power. In humility and self-giving we open space for God to reveal his power. It is the power of grace and love. It is the power of peace and integrity. It is the power of the Spirit and truth. It is the power that honors and heals, forgives, and unites. It is the power of giving power away. [11].

The life of self-giving is so fulfilling in the sense that one will always see the legacy and fruits of their sacrifices, like a gardener who reaps the harvest of their toil. This is the reason Abraham was blessed and called the father of nations when he gave up all his known powers, prestige, and pride of his tribes, embarked on a journey to the unknown, becoming an outcast and migrant in another land, and he was searching for the true power that is in Christ Jesus, not human pride (Genesis 12). There is power in the Gospel of Christ, the redeeming power that every true believer must embrace and live by. Our tribal alliances, societal approvals, or honours will never save us, but Christ will through humility and submission to his will by giving up earthly pride and powers and clinging to Christ's humble service. Jesus reminded that those who would lose themselves (their pride, power and life) for the sake of the Gospel will gain eternal life, not those who pursue the gains of this world and dwell in the delights of societal powers (Mark 8: 35-37).

7. Conclusion

Christian leadership in a shame-honour culture and any other culture must be shaped by the Cross. It is the ultimate sacrifice Jesus made that must guide the Christians and his humility to embrace vulnerability to the very end to receive the Glory. We must be inspired and led by the Holy Spirit to follow in the footsteps of Christ as Christian leaders. There is no gain in the flesh, and as such, the expectations of the circles, social groups, or tribes would never lead us to Christ, but the humble embrace of humility, imitating Christ in brokenness and servanthood would make Christian flourish and gain the grace of God. This will further strengthen the mission and spread of the Gospel beyond the borders of particular ethnic communities, tribes or groups, hence presenting the Christian leaders as true servants whose roles is the Gospel mission and not ethnic affiliates.

The true honour lies in Christ Jesus and his gospel mission to the world which is the main vocation for Christians. The Church must raise leaders who are humble, always ready to serve, and who exhibit the humility of Christ. These are the

leaders who will not succumb to community politics, society beliefs, or social group pressures, but will always rise above all the challenges, standing their ground as true servants of Jesus Christ and leading his people humbly with true love and care until the very end.

Author Contributions

Daniel Ajak Magai is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



Daniel Ajak Magai is an academic and development professional with extensive experience in research, humanitarian intervention, peacebuilding, and Christian leadership. He currently serves at UNHCR in South Sudan, leading strategic planning and policy engagement on inclusion of

displaced population and mainstreaming global initiatives and policies in national planning and development initiatives. He has a humble background, including founding educational and social transformation institutions dedicated to fostering ethical leadership, social transformation, and theological training. His academic background includes three Master's: in Global Leadership (Fuller), Development Studies (UCU), International Relations (OCU), and a Bachelor of Nouthetic Counselling (Christian Life Teachings Bible College). He is pursuing a Ph.D. at EUCLID University alongside Christian Leadership Research at the Open Christian University. His research interests and scholarly works lie at the intersection of religion, ethics, and leadership, with a focus on conflict resolution, transformational development, foreign policy, humanitarian interventions, and peacebuilding.

Research Field

Daniel Ajak Magai: Christian Leadership, Foreign Policy, Transformational Development, Religion, Peacebuilding, Post-conflict nation-building, Human Rights, and Humanitarianism.