

**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 drawn from social and cultural texture analysis to discover principles of biblical leadership succession. It provides a summary of principles about leadership succession, including that it: (a) starts with honorable leaders, (b) is an ongoing process, (c) is a family affair, (d) focuses on Christ's authority with leaders as His agents, and (e) is action oriented. From the principles, this article infers five Christian ethical responses for organizational leadership: (a) it begins with a leader's honor and then reveals itself in the leader's life, (b) it is a continual process for the best interest of the organization, (c) it flows from the organization's values and people, (d) it serves organizational values, and (e) it is an actionable event. Finally, this study challenges the reader to be an honorable leader.

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 author 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 study challenges the reader to be an honorable leader.

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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 holiness,⁵ focusing attention away from external issues to internal issue of the

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, ATLASReligion, 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.

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 called an encomium—a rhetorical tool used to prove a person as honorable by telling his 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 study 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 author agrees with McKenna and argues that 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

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.

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 author infers the following biblical leadership succession principles:

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.

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.

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

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."

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 were the future leaders Jesus intended to use to build His church. They were 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 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 would 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 were discipling to a point of fully identifying with and falling under the lordship of Jesus.²³ This article argues that baptism reflects a type of kenosis, a step of publicly announcing the

¹⁶ Paul Hertig, “The Great Commission Revisited: The Role of God's Reign in Disciple Making” *Missiology* 29 (2001): 343–353, ATLAReligion, <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.

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, the following principle emerges:

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 study examines four of Matthew’s culturally relevant rhetorical tools plus Matthew’s record of Jesus’ final commission of His

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.

disciples. From that examination, this author 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.

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Extracting from Matthew's use of an encomium to establish an overarching theme of honor in Christ's leadership, this study 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

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Biblical Principle

- 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.
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- 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.

Christian Ethical Response to 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 the 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.

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- (e) Organizational leadership succession must flow from action, in contrast to just issuing promises or good intentions.

Matthew frames leadership succession as critical and deliverable for all organizations. If followed, it may provide a plumb 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?"

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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.

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