

THE UPWARD CALL

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet;
but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,
I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God*

IN CHRIST JESUS.

(Philippians 3.13-14 NASB)

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DO NOT BE CALLED #2

“But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments. They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men. But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. (Matthew 23.5-12 NASB)

Those who have known me for years know that I see a danger in the many official titles held by so many today. Some might think that I am obsessed with the matter and have something against leadership in general. Perhaps there is some truth in this, for some of my experiences with leadership in the world, as well as in the ecclesia, have given me some indelible memories, some of which are not very pleasant. But the Lord does not lead us through trials without a purpose, so I believe these experiences were necessary to reveal to me His heart on leadership, as well as to train me in the matter of leadership.

First, I must be clear that I am not taking a stand against the various terms used in the Bible. Apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor-teacher, elder, and deacon are all scriptural. But the question is: Why does the ecclesia today place so much emphasis on something the New Testament does not emphasize? Why do so many make these terms into great titles that men parade before the Lord's people? Today, men are not satisfied with even these Biblical terms, so they have added extra titles like “Reverend” or “the Most Reverend.” This may not be enough of a title, so they add on their educational degree as well—“Reverend Doctor So-and-So.” Others take on the title of “Pastor and Founder of Such-and-Such Church.” Why is there such an emphasis on these various titles? Could it be that there is a need for legitimacy? Somehow they think that if they have a lofty title, people will look at them as a spiritual leader and give them respect. This is no different than the religious Pharisees that the Lord condemned and to whom He spoke woes. Leadership is not a title. Men can take on the loftiest titles in the world and be highly recognized in religious circles, but this is not leadership. Men can stand in pulpits with puffed-up chests and great oration, but this is not leadership. Men can even write highly successful books that sell millions of copies, but this does not make them spiritual leaders. Leadership is based on inner character and not on outward appearance or even performance. It is a spiritual matter. The issue is about spiritual leadership, not titles that exalt the man and that mirror leadership found in the world system (*kosmos*).

In Matthew 23, we discover that the Lord Jesus began to speak to the multitudes and to His disciples. He began by referring to the Pharisees who had seated themselves in the chair of Moses. In other words, they assumed a position of honor amongst the people. They wanted to tell the people what to do, but they themselves would not do the things they demanded of others. When they acted, they did things to be noticed by men. This was the heart of the religious leaders—to be noticed. I might add that this is the trademark of many leaders in the world as well. There is not much difference between the two.

How were they noticed? By their deeds; by their dress, garments, or appearance; by taking the place of honor and the chief seats; by receiving respectful greetings; and finally, by being called Rabbi by men! In other words, the Pharisees were interested in being lifted up and exalted amongst the people. They were full of pride, and that pride demanded they be recognized. What was one of the ways they desired recognition? By taking on an official title, Rabbi! They strode amongst the people and took great pride in being called a teacher. Why? Because it meant that they knew more than the people. It gave them respect and a sense of power over the people.

But what was the Lord's response to this pride? How did He instruct His disciples, the ones whom He was calling into leading His people? Jesus said, "**But do not be called Rabbi.**" Then He went on to say, "**Do not call anyone on earth your father.**" And finally He said, "**Do not be called leader** (or master, director)." Instead, He said that there is only one Teacher, one Father, and one Leader or Master. The phrase **only one** sums up the whole matter.

Is it possible that the Lord was putting His finger on an issue that has challenged His ecclesia down through the centuries? Pride! Self-exaltation! When men want to be recognized by titles, perhaps the root cause or, better yet, the heart's desire is the boastful pride of life, the spirit of the world.

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. (1 John 2.16 NASB)

The boastful spirit of pride stands in opposition to the coming kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. It is worldly and has no place in a leader called of God. A leader amongst the Lord's people would rather be called a brother than accept a title that puffs up self. The Lord told His disciples: "**You are all brothers.**" This is the proper designation, no matter how visible one's service is to the Lord. In fact, if one is highly visible in the work of the Lord, then it is even more essential that the person never assume a position of pride. Leaders are to set an example, particularly for younger believers. If they see puffed-up leaders, then they will try to follow that example. It will be to the leader's shame, and they will be held accountable before the Lord in that day.

"But the greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted." (Matthew 23.11-12 NASB)

Our Lord spoke these words to reveal the opposite of worldly, exalted leadership. Leadership in the ecclesia of God is based on being a servant of God and of the brethren. It is as if the Lord says: "If you want to be exalted today, go ahead and assume the lofty places. Your reward will be given to you in full in this age. You will receive exaltation from the multitudes and the world, but not from Me. In the day of My judgment, you will be humbled before Me as you see your loss. If you want to be rewarded in the day of My judgment, then be humbled today and you will be exalted in that day. You will hear, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'"

True leaders are ones who walk in humility. They would rather be called a brother and bond-servant of Jesus Christ than to be lifted up to a high place of exaltation. Paul, in his great letter to the ecclesia in Ephesus, entreated the saints **to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace** (Ephesians 4.1-3 NASB). It is true that Paul then referred to apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers; but he began with a foundational principle that applies to all of God's children and that must be manifested in leadership—all must walk in humility.

True spiritual leaders are ones who walk in humility and in spirit, not in the pride of title, position, or lofty places. One walking in humility would rather be called a brother than take on any title. After all, our Lord is humble and meek. He came to serve by laying down His life for others (the world), and all who are called to lead must follow His path as well.