

Pastor as friend: Reinterpreting Christian leadership

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Abstract

Christian leadership has long enjoyed the idea of servant-leadership or doularchy that has been seen as standing against any form of kyriarchy. This article is an attempt to solve the problems left by doularchy and construct a model of philiarchic leadership based on the identity of pastors as friends. Several texts in the Gospel of John will be reinterpreted using the philiarchic lens. The article concludes with three applied ideas that today's Christian leaders should take into consideration.

KEYWORDS

doularchy, friendship, kyriarchy, leadership, philiarchy, the Gospel of John

1 | PHILIA IN JOHN

This article is an attempt to construct a new understanding of Christian leadership based on the idea of *philia* as the self-sacrificing form of agape. Through a careful analysis on the value of *philia* in the Gospel of John, I argue that philiarchy or “leadership by friends” has potential for transcending the ad hoc nature of doularchy (leadership by servants). To do so, I begin with the discussion of doularchy as an antidote to the pyramidal leadership called kyriarchy (leadership by masters). Then, I propose philiarchy as the ideal form of leadership taught by Jesus, who no longer calls his disciples servants but friends (Jn 15:15). I use this verse as the key to interpreting the last dialogue between the risen Christ and Peter in John 21:15-23. Finally, I give some suggestions as to how to apply the philiarchic model to today's Christian leadership. In this part, special attention to the Indonesian context will be given to make my proposal relevant for today's churches in Indonesia as well as in other contexts.

2 | HIDDEN KYRIARCHY IN CHRISTIAN DOULARCHY

The idea of servant-leadership has gained popularity in recent years. Christian communities have deemed it the best definition of Christian leadership, since they can identify themselves as servant-leaders like Jesus. Randall O'Brien is of the opinion that, “the Christian leader models servant leadership just as Christ lived.”¹ John Stott even believes that Jesus is the

one who introduces the idea and practice of servant-leadership to the world.² Interestingly, “servant-leadership” was introduced by Robert K. Greenleaf in his 1970 publication entitled *The Servant as Leader* as a contribution to the non-ecclesial management field.³ Since then, many Christian writers have adopted the term and attempted to prove that the idea is perfectly consonant with that of Jesus. Some theologians even argue that the idea was lived out and practiced by Jesus Christ long before Greenleaf introduced the term.⁴

I do not want to discuss the historical development of the term and its reception into Christian communities. Suffice it to say that many Christians have adopted and interpreted the term through the Christian understanding of servanthood and leadership. For the purpose of this article, however, I would suggest using *doularchy* (leadership by servants), which was introduced by Korean theologian Kim Yong Bock as an alternative to Greenleaf's notion of servant-leadership.⁵ Christians easily can understand doularchy as a better explanation to what Jesus taught, in contrast to kyriarchy (leadership by masters).⁶ The conflict between kyriarchy and doularchy is most obvious in Mark 10:42-44:

So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

The conjunction *de* (“but”) in verse 43 emphasizes the contrast between the practice of kyriarchy in verse 42 and that of doularchy in verses 43–44. The context of Jesus’ sayings in the verses is obvious. Jesus criticizes his disciples who are competing with one another over who will be the greatest and the leader among themselves in the Kingdom of God. The competition is triggered by the request of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, “to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (Mk 10:37). This sparks anger among the other ten disciples, not because they have a more virtuous idea of what a disciple should be, but because they also want to be leaders (v. 41). Ironically, the quarrel occurs after Jesus tells them about what would happen to him as the suffering servant (Mk 10:32–34).

2.1 | An antibiotic

With many Christian writers, I agree that Jesus exemplified and embodied servant-leadership—the doularchy. Jesus also taught his disciples to be servant-leaders in order to counter kyriarchy as the culture prevalent in society. My problem with doularchy, however, is that it easily can slip into another form of kyriarchy. Jesus proposes doularchy as the counter-culture against kyriarchy. While kyriarchy implies a pyramidal structure of power, doularchy suggests an upside-down or reversed pyramid of power. In other words, Jesus’ doularchy must function as an antidote to the problem of kyriarchy. However, in the long run, one can easily find a practice where those who agree with doularchy have practiced kyriarchy instead. In other words, kyriarchy can easily masquerade as doularchy.

Let me give an illustration here. If you are ill because of bacteria, your doctor will prescribe you a certain dose of antibiotics over a period of days. You have to take the antibiotics exactly as prescribed by the doctor, without reducing or increasing the dose. It is also the case that doularchy is a form of “antibiotic” that attacks kyriarchy. But, after recovering you should no longer take the drug, as if it were a nutrient for your health. No, it can be poisonous. Similarly, doularchy is an ad-hoc counter-culture (or, antibiotic) against kyriarchy, but, I believe, Jesus never intended it as the ideal culture (or, nutrient) for his community of disciples.

On the practical level, there are many people in the church who use the terms “serving,” “servant,” or “service” constantly and excessively. A local congregation that I know personally, for example, has monthly session meetings. The meetings are basically democratic. The numbers of male and female elders also are equally distributed. However, one can expect that when lunch is about to begin, some female elders will move to the next room to prepare to serve the meal. I once asked them why there were no male elders helping them, and they said that serving meals was part of their responsibility as women. For them, it was precisely what they understood by the idea of being servants! Here one

can find a strange mixture of doularchy and kyriarchy. The rhetoric of doularchy has been used to justify the practice of kyriarchy. In the above case, the patriarchal practice of limiting women to the domestic tasks is unchallenged and nurtured through the use of catchwords such as “servant,” “service,” or “serving.”

My personal experience on the local level is in line with critiques against the concept of servant-leadership posed by many theologians, especially feminist theologians. Edward Zaragoza criticizes Greenleaf’s concept of servant leaders as fundamentally “a corporate CEO in disguise! ... Therefore, as a paradigm, servant leadership sets forth a governing pattern or framework by which ministry is interpreted as leadership first, and then servanthood. In so doing, servant leadership offers a very troubling misreading of Jesus.”⁷ Feminist theologians also criticize doularchy or servant-leadership. Deborah Eicher-Catt, using a semiotic analysis of gendered language and discourse, is of the opinion that, “although [servant leadership] appears to promote innocent values and is often culturally applauded for its potentially-ethical and spiritual influence on organization life, a closer examination reveals that it perpetuates a theology of leadership that upholds androcentric patriarchal norms.”⁸

As such, servant leadership or doularchy is a good model for challenging the kyriarchy that has been prevalent in the larger society. Its purpose is to disclose the dominant discourse and practice in social leadership. However, the good intention easily can be twisted when its ad hoc characteristic is permanently idealized. In the final analysis, doularchy can be used for maintaining and justifying kyriarchy, in which the latter is disguised in the former. In that sense, the kyriarchic doularchy can turn out to be a practice that contradicts what Jesus originally intended. Doularchy can function to cover up the very domination underlying kyriarchy that it wants to unveil.

3 | FROM DOULARCHY TO PHILIARCHY

I believe that the ad hoc nature of doularchy that Jesus suggested is of importance and therefore should not be treated as the ideal model for Christian leadership. When one reads the whole story of Jesus’ ministerial life, one can see that doularchy reflects the sacrificial language of the cross, on which Jesus offered his death, as a subversive message against the dominant power of the Roman Empire. Efrain Agostos correctly argues, “At the heart of Gospel message ... lies the cross of Jesus Christ, the ultimate symbol of service, sacrifice, commitment, and also an anti-imperial posture.”⁹

However, the cross is not the ultimate story of the Christian faith. It is the resurrection of Christ that anticipates the renewal of all things that becomes the pinnacle of the life of all creation. In this perspective, the subversive message of the

cross would be meaningless if it did not pronounce the coming of an equal community centered on the triune *koinonia*. If the idea of doularchy refers to Christ's sacrifice as the critique of kyriarchy, then there is still a need to have a more constructive model of leadership that points to an ideal concept based on resurrection and the renewal of all things.

Jesus indeed proclaims clearly the ideal model of leadership when he says to his disciples, "I do not call you servants any longer ... but I have called you friends" (Jn 15:15). The shift from servanthood to friendship is so powerful that it empowers the church to construct itself as a community of friends.¹⁰ The disciples now listened to Jesus not as the one who came to "serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (cf. Mk 10:45), but as the one who laid down his life because he loved his friends. The Johannine text provides a basis for my proposal of friend-leadership or *philiarchy*.

It is interesting to note that so many times Jesus expressed his willingness to lay down his life for others. There are three sets of verses in the Gospel of John where the words are used intentionally: four times in the context of the Good Shepherd discourse (10:11, 15, 17, 18); twice in Jesus' dialogue with Peter at the Last Supper (13:37, 38); and twice in the pre-resurrection dialogue (15:13, 16). It is obvious that, in the Gospel of John, Jesus' willingness to lay down his life for others relates the idea of shepherd-hood to friendship. It is in the context of both shepherd-hood and friendship that the dialogue between Jesus and Peter can be understood correctly, and this can become the backdrop of new way of reinterpreting the final dialogue between Jesus and Peter in John 21:15-23.

Before this, however, I discuss the common misunderstanding among Christians about the concept of love. It was Anders Nygren who popularized the hierarchical understanding of Christian love.¹¹ He wrote that *agape* is the only authentic love for Christians, while *eros* is a possessive love that distorts Christians. Although he did not discuss *philia* at length, Nygren understands *philia* merely as an "egocentric desire" that is a subset of *eros*. As such, *philia* is inferior to *agape*, whereas *eros* is contrary to *agape*. Nygren's hierarchical view of love has been very popular among Christians, and it has been treated as canonical whenever one talks about Christian love.

To offer a reinterpretation of the final dialogue between Jesus and Peter, I first deconstruct Nygren's idea and suggest that *agape*, *philia*, and *eros* are three different dimensions of the same notion of Christian love. Rather than viewing *agape* as the only authentic love and *philia* as the lower form of love, I suggest *philia* as a sacrificial form of Christian *agape* within the context of the relationship among friends. In contrast to the popular understanding, *philia* is to be perceived as the self-sacrificing form of *agape*.

It is interesting to note that there are some Indonesian words, such as *kerabat*, *akrab*, and *karib*, which all refer to a personal close relationship. All those words, along with

kurban, have the same root in Arabic and Hebrew—*qrb*—which means "sacrifice." Thus, friendship as a form of close relationship is signified by the willingness to sacrifice one's life for one's friends.

This means that in contrast to kyriarchy and doularchy, which both demonstrate vertical relationship between the leader and the led, the idea of leadership based on friendship, or philiarchy, understands relationship in a more horizontal, egalitarian, and equal way. This is the ideal culture that Jesus wanted to offer to the new community of the risen Christ. By using this perspective, I now move to the final dialogue between Jesus and Peter in John 21.

4 | A DIALOGUE BETWEEN TWO FRIENDS

It is important to emphasize from the beginning that I believe that Peter must have remembered what Jesus said to his disciples before he was arrested and crucified. Jesus said, "No one has greater love (*agapēn*) than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (*philōn*)" (Jn 15:13). Gail R. O'Day succinctly argues, "What distinguishes John 15:13 from other teachings on friendship and death is that Jesus does not merely talk about laying down his life for his friends. His life is an incarnation of this teaching. Jesus did what the philosophers only talked about—he laid down his life for his friends. This makes all the difference in appropriating friendship as a theological category."¹² It can be said that Jesus had an ideal view of *philia* as the highest form of *agape*, because *philia* is manifested in one's willingness to die for one's friends. *Philia* can be seen as the sacrificial face of *agape*. As such, Peter must have remembered this when the risen Christ met him and asked whether he loved him. To make the dialogue clearer, I shall summarize the content of the dialogue in the following list:

- v. 15 Jesus asked for the first time if Simon loved him with *agape*.
Simon confirmed that he loved Jesus, but with *philia*.
Jesus then commanded Peter to tend his lambs.
- v. 16 Jesus asked for the second time if Simon loved him with *agape*.
Simon confirmed that he loved Jesus, but with *philia*.
Jesus then commanded Peter to tend his lambs.
- v. 17 Jesus asked for the third time if Simon loved him with *philia*.
Simon confirmed that he loved Jesus with *philia*.
Jesus then commanded Peter to tend his lambs.

It was Andres Nygren who then popularized the interpretation that put *philia* under *agape*. This popular view misleads readers into misunderstanding the conversation, suggesting

that twice Jesus asks Peter if he loved Jesus with agape as the highest standard of love, but Peter was only able to love him with philia. On the third question, Jesus “lowered” his standard by asking if Peter loved him with philia love. Such an (mis-)understanding is very popular among Christians, as evident in Samuel Wells’ words:

Peter and Jesus simply seem to have different understandings of love. Peter assumes that the love of a friend is all that is required. He uses the language of friendship throughout—filial language. It is as if the catastrophe of his betrayal has not taught him that anything was wrong in the love he had for Jesus but only that he had a blip, a fit of absence of mind and heart. He offers to resume that filial love in this conversation at the lakeshore. But Jesus is asking for more. Jesus is using the language of utter selfless love, the intimate and self-giving agape love that God has for us. In other words, Jesus is saying, “Do you love me as a friend, the way you love everyone else? Or do you love me wholly and utterly, the way I love you?” The pain comes in Peter’s reply: “As a friend, of course.” And the poignant irony is that Peter doesn’t realize what Jesus is asking and thinks he is giving the answer Jesus wants to hear. He even thinks Jesus is being unreasonable in asking the question a third time.¹³

4.1 | Sacrificial love

Here, I propose a new way of approaching the dialogue based on the idea of philia as the sacrificial face of agape, in which agape is not replaced but rather taken into a higher level. In this interpretation, Jesus’ first two questions are not just queries to which Peter responds, as indicated by Wells, by the changing of *agape* to *philia*. On the contrary, Peter affirms Jesus’ agapaic language, as he positively replied “Yes!” (Greek: *nai*; 21:15-16). Peter wants to say that he loves Jesus with the agapaic love; but more than that, he wants to love Jesus not just with the common agapaic love, but also with the sacrificial philia. He is willing to die for his friend Jesus. This interpretation makes more sense to me, since Peter might have remembered clearly what Jesus uttered to his disciples before he died, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13).

In asking Peter for the third time, Jesus “gives up” with Peter’s adamant answers. Jesus now changes his diction by entering into Peter’s expectation and using a different question, that is, if Peter loved him with philia as the sacrificial love. The third question indeed makes Peter very sad. It would be incorrect to think that Peter is sad because Jesus asks him the same question three times. As a matter of fact, it is the first time Jesus asks Peter if he loves him with philia, whereas

in the first two Jesus uses agape. Peter is saddened, rather, because he is disappointed with Jesus’ doubt of Peter’s filial and sacrificial love in his first two answers and only in the third question does Jesus begin to treat Peter according to what Peter wants. Unlike the popular view that Jesus has lowered his expectation of Peter’s response of love, from agape to philia, my interpretation demonstrates the contrary. Peter can be seen as someone who elevates Jesus’ expectation of him.

Seen from this perspective, the writer of the Gospel of John puts the last dialogue of Jesus and Peter in the perspective of friendship. The broken relationship has now been restored. After the dialogue, Jesus foretells the death of Peter in the future, followed by an invitation to follow Jesus (21:18-19).

Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go. (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, “Follow me.”

This foretelling and invitation are closely connected to another dialogue that occurred during the Last Supper (13:36-38):

Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered, “Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterwards.” Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” Jesus answered, “Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.”

The two texts show several parallel points. The first text is a conversation that occurred before the crucifixion, while the second text contains only Jesus’ words to and about Peter. However, the central issues of both texts are about following Jesus and willingness to die for Jesus. In the pre-crucifixion text, it is Peter who expressed his willingness to follow Jesus, but Jesus responded that Peter could not follow him then, because the disciple would soon deny him three times. However, in the post-resurrection dialogue, after Jesus renewed Peter three times, he invited Peter to follow him. In the first text, Peter was very eager to die for Jesus. The eagerness remained even at the final dialogue, in which Peter expressed his sacrificial philia. Jesus respected Peter’s willingness and even foretold the death of the disciple, a death that would accomplish his sacrificial philia for his beloved friend.

This new way of approaching the text demonstrates that in the Gospel of John, friendship is connected to the identity of Jesus’ followers as disciples and shepherds. This means that to be a disciple is to be a shepherd, and vice versa. One can

be both a disciple and a shepherd precisely because one is a friend of Jesus. Moreover, friendship with Jesus in this context is signified by the willingness to lay down one's life for Jesus.

5 | CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP TODAY

There are at least three applications of the concept of pastor-friend leadership that speak to the church today. The first idea has to do with the quotidian or everyday nature of leadership. What is most intriguing in the post-resurrection dialogue between Jesus and Peter is Jesus' persistent responses to Peter's answers. After each exchange of words, Jesus concludes with an imperative to Peter that he must feed or tend Jesus' lambs. This command can be disappointing. Peter was ready to die for Jesus as his friend, but Jesus commands him to feed the lambs. This is the whole point of Christian leadership, however.

Jesus teaches Peter that to be a shepherd for others is a logical consequence of being Jesus' friend. Thus, Jesus shifts Peter's focus, from his willingness to die for Jesus to his call to feed Jesus' lambs, from death to life, from being a friend who sacrifices his life to a pastor who faithfully cares for others. Jesus teaches Peter not only to have courage to die for Jesus, but rather to have courage to live meaningfully for others.

5.1 | Quotidian leadership

In my Indonesian context, I can see how this quotidian nature of Christian pastoral leadership has been missing in many churches. The main cause, I believe, is the separation of the liturgical and ecclesial events from their everydayness. We tend to sterilize or sanitize the church and its liturgies and other activities from the messiness of the everyday world, assuming that in so doing the church will be pure, clean, and free from sins. Consequently, Christian friendship becomes more symbolic than actual. It is celebrated as a ritual liturgy but not as a liturgy of life.¹⁴

Jesus' attempt to shift Peter's focus from death to life gives a new insight into Christian leadership. The quality of a Christian leader is confirmed in his or her daily relationships and interactions with those people he or she leads. In other words, one has to "die" every day to give life for others as friends. Thus, Jesus' once-and-for-all death empowers leaders to die for others every day. Seen from this perspective, Christian leadership receives its quotidian meaning. Unless one is faithful as a friend-pastor to others in one's daily life, one will not be able to die as a sacrifice for the sake of one's friends.

5.2 | A good shepherd

Second, Christian leaders must imitate who Jesus was and what Jesus did as the exemplary pastor-friend. In the Good

Shepherd discourse (Jn 10:1-21), using the pattern of *egō eimi* uniquely found in the Gospel of John, Jesus proclaims, "I am the good shepherd" (v. 11). Then, he also says that a "good" (*kalos*) shepherd "lays down his life for the sheep" (v. 12). Here, once again, to lay down one's life for others is the characteristic of both a good pastor or shepherd and a good friend. This quality is repeated in verses 15 and 17. Yet, apart from these verses, Jesus explains other characteristics of the good shepherd, all of which have to do with quotidian practice of pastoring or shepherding (vv. 3, 4, 16, and 27). It is not coincidental that after teaching about himself as the Good Shepherd, Jesus then talks for the first time about shepherding in the final dialogue with Peter. It can be said that here Jesus wants to embrace Peter as a pastor-friend, drawing him into Jesus' own pastor-friendship.

It easily can be understood that in those verses, to be a good shepherd or pastor requires good relationships, a virtue primarily enacted by the shepherd or pastor. As such, today's friends-pastors must imitate the image of the good shepherd shown in Jesus, in which they take care of the sheep, befriending them in more equal relationships. It also is true that in befriending others, one connects his or her friends to Jesus as the good pastor-friend. The equality between the shepherd or pastor and the sheep or church members is ensured by the principle that they all are sheep within the guidance of Jesus the good pastor.

The call for imitating Christ as the exemplary pastor-friend has to be heard by many Christian leaders in Indonesia. In many tribal churches, where gospel and culture have been closely intertwined, the idea of gospel as the critique of culture is subordinated to the practice of the culture softening the message of the gospel, often in the name of contextualization or inculturation. In such a context, to get the position of "top leader" in the churches is a matter of harsh competition. Not rarely does the competition injure the relationship within the churches. In short, the face of the church as a community of friends fades away and its kyriarchic face becomes more dominant. In this context, the importance of imitating Christ as the good pastor-friend is fundamentally obvious.

5.3 | A place for doularchy

Third, the rethinking of pastoral leadership as philiarchy does not necessarily mean that the doularchic model should be discarded. The challenge rather is to distinguish the different levels of use. Doularchy always will be of importance, since the church and its leaders are called to be present faithfully in the world. One must not abandon the fact that there are still, and always will be, many kyriarchic practices in society as well as in the church, whether or not these are covered up by the doularchy. I suggest that church leaders always must use doularchy to counter kyriarchy. The prophetic voice of

doularchy cannot be silenced when faced with any kyriarchic practices, both outside and inside the church.

To say that kyriarchy occurs only in the world or outside the church would only demonstrate our naïveté. If this happens, one will fail to realize that in many cases, the worst instances of the practice of domination can be found in the very place where doularchy or servant-leadership is claimed and practiced, namely within the church. Yet, at the same time, we need to be cautious of the potential twisting of doularchy into kyriarchy if we misuse it beyond its primary yet limited function. It is no easy task to uncover the real face of kyriarchy behind the mask of doularchy.

In my Indonesian context, although this may possibly be relevant in other contexts as well, kyriarchy appears as *patriarchy* (domination of men over women), *gerontarchy* (domination of elders over youngers), *clericarchy* (domination of clerics over non-clerics), and other forms as well. Churches in Indonesia are called to simultaneously practice doularchy as the counter-culture and philiarchy as the ideal culture. Right before the Passover, Jesus washed his disciples' feet (Jn 13:1-20), symbolizing doularchy that turns hierarchy upside-down. However, after the washing, a short conversation takes place between Jesus and Peter (vv. 36–38) that suggests a shift from doularchy to philiarchy, since it focuses on Peter's willingness to lay down his life for Jesus. In short, we need to constantly practice doularchy as we also constantly deal with kyriarchic power, even within the church. But, it is philiarchy that becomes the ideal form of ecclesial relation and leadership.

6 | A COMMUNITY OF FRIENDS

In conclusion, I believe that the three aforementioned dimensions of the pastor–friend leadership can contribute to the discourse on Christian leadership today. My conviction is that the concept and practice of pastor–friend leadership will enable the church everywhere to demonstrate its faithful presence in the world by being a community of friends in the midst of unfriendliness existing in society. In so doing, I hope the church, in the words of John Davidson Hunter, “will help to make the world a little bit better.”¹⁵

ENDNOTES

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- ¹³ Wells, S. (2007). A friend like Peter: The logic of forgiveness. *The Christian Century* 124(3), 25-26.
- ¹⁴ I borrow the idea of “liturgy of life” from Peter Phan, who modifies Karl Rahner's “liturgy of the world.” By this term, Phan means the “universal experiences of God and mystical encounters with God's grace in the midst of everyday life, made possible by God's self-gift embracing the whole human history, always and everywhere.” See Peter Phan, P. (2007). The liturgy of life as the “summit and source” of the eucharistic liturgy. In T. Fitzgerald & D. A. Lysik (Eds.), *Incongruities: Who we are and how we pray* (p. 20). Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications.
- ¹⁵ Hunter, J. D. (2010). *To change the world: The irony, tragedy, and possibility of Christianity in the late modern world* (p. 286). New York: Oxford University Press. The article was finished two days after a painful incident of the burning down of two church buildings in Singkil, Aceh, Indonesia, where the majority faith is Islam. After the burnings, around 7,000 Christians fled away from the area southward to the North Sumatra area.

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