

A LEADERSHIP WHEEL IN MYANMAR: A PERSONAL-THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION¹

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Abstract

This essay is a personal-theological reflection on Christian leadership in Myanmar from my personal experiences in ministry. Leadership is, in this paper, pictured as a wheel that has three spokes, each of which has two poles. Each pole stands for a particular leadership characteristic. The two poles of the first spoke are given as obedience vs. creativity; second, faithfulness vs. truthfulness; and third, family vs. body structure. The problem with Christian leadership in Myanmar is that one pole in each spoke is tightly screwed at the cost of others, and this leads to polarization. The paper examines two fundamental reasons for these polarizations in the leadership wheel in Myanmar. The first is the polarizing way of thinking – either obedience or creativity, faithfulness or truthfulness, and family or body structure. This thinking has conditioned Christians to be stuck in choosing between obedience or creativity, faithfulness or truthfulness, and family or body structure. The second is cultural captivity. Christians came to be a part of the leadership culture in Myanmar by following the pattern of the society knowingly or unknowingly.

Keywords: Leadership, polarities and polarization, obedience, creativity, faithfulness or loyalty, truthfulness, family structure, nepotism, body administration, Myanmar

Introduction

Leadership is a subject offered in most Bible seminaries in Myanmar and which many churches preach and teach. Many forms of leadership such as servant and biblical leadership seminars have been run in Yangon and across the country. However, many Christian leaders in Myanmar still practice a culturally handed-down form of leadership, which is top-down and hierarchical. Leadership becomes a subject to which most Christians pay significant attention, but it is something to which they are still incompetent as much as they attend. This is the reality that we see among Christian leaders in Myanmar. Why is it so? There may be different reasons, for example, the cultural impact. However, this paper does not focus only on the socio-cultural impact of Christian leadership. Instead, it examines some polarities and polarization of Christian leaders and their leadership in Myanmar from a personal, theological perspective to signpost where we lack balance. Overall, this paper is a theological reflection on the Christian leadership practiced in

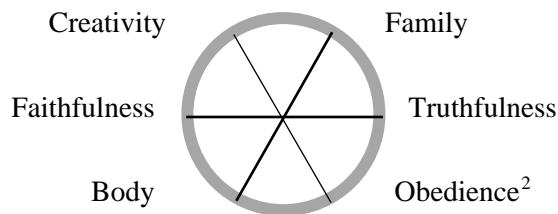
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¹ This paper is merely a reflection on leadership practiced in Myanmar from a personal-theological understanding.

Myanmar by extrapolating from personal, ministerial experiences and observation. To indicate the polarities and polarization, I picture leadership as a wheel and leaders as drivers of the wheel.

Polarities and Polarizations

If leadership is portrayed as a wheel, the role of spokes would be part and parcel of the wheel for smooth operation. Spokes connect the rim to the hub, holding the wheel, so it does not twist or become distorted. Each spoke has two poles, each of which stabilizes the wheel. A wheel has many spokes, and each plays a crucial role in rolling the wheel. Maintaining balance is of supreme importance in setting a spoke in a wheel. If a pole of the spoke is screwed tightly (polarized) while the other is not, the wheel will malfunction, and finally, the wheel itself will become warped. Setting a single spoke in a wheel is essential because the imbalance (polarization) occurs when one pole is firmly fastened while another is not. This will lead to the wheel rolling in an ungainly way. Only when each spoke is proportionately screwed and balanced, can the wheel roll efficiently. If leadership is a wheel, leaders would be the ones who drive the wheel. The role of a leader is to fix the spokes in the wheel without polarizing one over another so that the wheel can roll in the direction that the leader determines. The following diagram expresses three polarities of Christian leadership in Myanmar:



Obedience Over Creativity

The first characteristic polarization in the spokes of the leadership wheel in Myanmar is obedience over creativity. Here obedience simply means doing or following what one is told or asked to do, whereas creativity refers to the ability to make something new using skill and imagination. Many Christian leaders in Myanmar love to be surrounded by people who will always obey them.

² In this paper, I have described merely three spokes. There may be more than three, but I focus on these three because they are the most dominant features among Christian leaders in Myanmar.

Unquestioning obedience is expected; therefore, any suggestive or counter-question is unwelcome. For them, questions are deemed to be opposition. This polarization of obedience-over-creativity leads followers to think less and act without reflection. Followers are just to do their best in what they are asked to do so as to gratify their leader rather than for the betterment of a church or an organization. For followers, winning their leader's favor becomes an end, producing a sycophancy culture. Therefore, we must explore what the Bible teaches about obedience.

What does the Bible teach about obedience? What kind of obedience does God require of his people? Does God want us to obey him totally and unconditionally without any excuses? Is that the kind of obedience that the Bible teaches? Those questions are necessary because Christians should understand what obedience God wants from us, what kind of obedience Christians should give to their leaders, and whether obedience to God and human leaders is the same, similar or different.

Once a student in one of my theology classes told me about a preacher in her church who said, "When God asks you to do something, do not question Him back but just obey him unquestioningly." This raises serious theological questions such as "Doesn't God want us to question him?" What kind of obedience does God want from us? Unquestioning obedience? Of course, the Bible has a plethora of examples in which we can see those who questioned God when they were called to a particular task. Before looking at the examples of those who asked back to God in the Bible, we will see some disputable passages which can be understood mistakenly.

For example, in Genesis 12:1-4, when the Lord said to Abraham to go, Abraham went. Did Abraham obey God blindly? On the one hand, it was blind because Abraham did not know where he was going. On the other, it was not blind obedience because he trusted the God who called him to leave his country and the promise he gave him. Put them together, Abraham acted in obedience to God by faith.³ The phrase "by faith" here means to say that Abraham believed, trusted, and felt confident about the God who called him. Without such trust and confidence, Abraham's obedience would have been blind, and therefore, he would have

³ See Hebrews 11:8, "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going," NIV.

followed God's call out of fear. If so, human beings are left with nothing but to follow God's order in whatever situation, whether willingly or reluctantly. God then becomes a totalitarian despot. To cite Richard Dawkins's words, "the God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction."⁴ In fact, biblical obedience goes together with faith.

In saying so, there is another danger we can encounter. "How could a man like Abraham, who was raised in a polytheistic culture, have a monotheistic faith?" The book of Genesis is evident in that it was not Abraham who found God, but God who called Abraham. In his study of the Sermon on the Mount, Dietrich Bonhoeffer sheds light on the nature of obedience: "Obedience to the call of Jesus never lies within our own power."⁵ It is an act of God working, strengthening, and empowering us to obey his call. The call Abraham received from the Lord affirms that salvation belongs to the Lord.⁶ We do not earn salvation by our total surrender to God. God graciously brought salvation himself through Jesus Christ. A mistaken view of obedience distorts the natures of God, grace, faith, and obedience.

In the Bible, obedience is a crucial characteristic for all Christians. What the Old Testament teaches is mainly focused on obedience to God. We read, "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22b ESV), whereas the New Testament tells us more about the obedience of the faith or to the truth, (Romans 16:26; 1 Pet. 1:22). The response that Peter and John gave to the Sanhedrin is shocking, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God," (Acts 4:19 NIV). Throughout the Scripture, it is crystal clear that obedience to God is neither optional nor an end itself, but it is a means to demonstrate our trust and love for God. In his study on "Faith and Obedience in Paul," Du Toit argues that "faith and obedience, while not fully identical, overlap to an important degree, making it impossible to divorce obedience from the faith event."⁷ True, obedience should be seen as another characteristic that springs up

⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Black Swan, Penguin Books, 2016), 51.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, revised ed., translated by R. H. Fuller (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1963), 93.

⁶ See Jonah 2:9.

⁷ A B Du Toit, "Faith and Obedience in Paul," *Neotestamentica*, New Testament Society of Southern Africa, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1991): 65.

from receiving the grace of God. Therefore, Du Toit concludes that “faith and obedience belong integrally together and qualify each other reciprocally.”⁸ Thus, Catholic theologian Columba Ryan asserts that religious obedience, unlike our army’s obedience, is voluntary and interior, not just a matter of external discipline.⁹ The God whom we obey is not a tyrant whose subjects are regarded as nothing but his pawns. Neither does God want us to obey Him out of fear. Ryan insists that if obedience is submission to the arbitrary will of God, God would be nothing but a tyrant. Likewise, if obedience is submission to law, it would be legalism. Therefore, legalism and arbitrariness are both enemies of the biblical teaching of obedience.¹⁰

If God is seen as a despot, there would surely be no place for creativity. How can subjects, whose master rules them arbitrarily and dictatorially, have time or space for creativity since they are seen as servants whose duty is to be on standby at all times to do whatever their master says without question? Creativity itself is a God-given gift to all humankind since the inception of the creation story. God gave Adam the responsibility to nurture and take care of his creation in Genesis 1 and 2. If God were a despot like many Christians think, he would surely prevent Adam and Eve from eating the forbidden fruit. If so, the Fall would never have occurred.

We interpret obedience as unquestioning submission in light of our cultural values, not from the biblical narrative. Under the military dictatorship for more than five decades, we Christians in Myanmar have unconsciously been conditioned to see and interpret things in the manner our culture rears us. A culture indeed conditions the way we read the Bible. Only through reading the Bible in its own narrative will we be able to give a proper critique of our culture. The cultural lens is also a substantial hermeneutical issue that we cannot discuss adequately in this essay. Suffice it to say that our understanding of obedience is shaped by our cultural patterns, not by the biblical narrative.

The further question is, “Is obedience to God and man inseparable? Or separable? To what extent does somebody need to obey man?” The various narratives in the

⁸ Ibid., 73.

⁹ Columba Ryan, O.P., “The Vows of Religion: II, Religious Obedience,” *Life of the Spirit (1946-1964)*, Vol. 13, No. 150 (December 1958): 242.

¹⁰ Ibid., 243.

Bible show that obedience to God does not overlap with obedience to man. To illustrate, Jesus himself did not obey all that the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees said. To them, Jesus was a disobedient and rebellious threat to their established religion. For Jesus, obeying his Father was more important than anything else. Jesus' disciples, when they were ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus by the Jewish leaders, replied to them, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God" (Acts 4:19). Here we see a clear boundary of obedience between God and people. However, we have to tackle another question: "Is it right to say that we no longer need to obey our leaders?"

The author of the book of Hebrews instructs, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Heb. 13:7, 17). Remembering and obeying our leaders is clear biblical teaching. However, many commentators notice the danger of misreading verse 17 as – *obey your leaders and submit to them even if they are corrupt leaders*. In dealing with these scriptural verses, the early church father, John Chrysostom (c.349-407 AD) highlighted three evils: anarchy, disobedience to rulers, and corrupt leaders. As the former two are evil, so is the last. Nevertheless, the last evil is worse than the first two. It is, for Chrysostom, better to be led by no one than to be led by one who is evil. "The first two evils are oftentimes saved, and oftentimes are in peril, but the latter will be all together in peril, being led into the pit [of destruction]."¹¹ So the question remains, "Should we obey corrupt leaders?"

In interpreting verse 17, it is essential to look at the context in which the author of the book of Hebrews wrote. Reading verse 17 in its own context, the leaders at this time were staunch and true, and the desire to turn away from Christ and back to

¹¹ John Chrysostom, "Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of St. John and Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. T. Keble and Frederic Gardiner, vol. 14, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 518–519.

Judaism was found only among the members.¹² William L Lane points out that the verb *παίθεσθαι* (*peithesthai*), which is translated as “to be persuaded” or “to obey,” is not primarily derived from respect for constituted structures of authority. Instead, it is the obedience that is won through persuasive conversation and that follows from it.¹³ Therefore, “obey and submit” should be understood as “we obey when we agree with what we are told to do, are persuaded of its correctness and profitableness; we commit, give up, when we have a contrary opinion.”¹⁴ Followers are not called to this kind of coercive or bullying obedience. Further, verse 17 should not be read and taken as a source for leaders to justify their leadership role. Instead, verse 17 should be the criteria through which to assess whether leaders in this contemporary age are following Christ’s example.

Simply put, contemporary Christian leaders are called to remember the leaders in the early Christian period and obey their teachings. Looking at verse 17 in this way, it teaches that faithful leadership in the Christian congregation should be both didactic and exemplary. To be precise, the leader must teach the word of God and have a faith and life that are worth imitating.¹⁵ The congregation in the church will follow and submit their lives to such leaders out of their trust and love for them.

In contrast, the concept of obedience that we practice in Myanmar does not derive from biblical teaching, but from cultural adaptation. The biblical understanding of obedience never overrides creativity. Cultural understanding of obedience in Myanmar is an engine that drives a dictatorial system. In the spoke of obedience-creativity, many Christian leaders in Myanmar secure the pole of obedience over that of creativity. Rolling the wheel of leadership in that way has repercussions causing a dearth of creativity in churches and organizations. A leader who wants obedience more than creativity from his followers or colleagues reinforces the culture of dictatorship instead of transforming it.

¹² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1938), 489–490.

¹³ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, vol. 47B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 554.

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James*, 490.

¹⁵ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews: Christ above All*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 263.

However, obedience to our leaders is not to be discarded for the sake of creativity alone. Unless there is obedience to leadership, nothing will happen. Obedience still plays a crucial role in leadership. If creativity is polarized over obedience, what follows would be anarchy and laissez-faire, allowing people to do whatever they want. The organization would be aimless, not knowing where it is heading. What is important is we need extra care to screw the spoke of obedience-versus-creativity in balance. If the pole of obedience is screwed too tight, the wheel will surely become imbalanced. Pointedly stated, we have two questions left: one for followers and the other for leaders. Two questions remain: “Do they obey their leaders at the cost of their creativity?” For leaders, “Do they expect obedience from their followers in such a way as to lose the creativity of followers?” These are the questions that leaders and their followers facing leaders and their followers in Myanmar.

Faithfulness Over Truthfulness

Another spoke of the leadership wheel is faithfulness over truthfulness. Like the spoke of obedience vs. creativity, the two poles of this spoke are emphasized in the Bible. One does not contradict the other unless one is more lopsided than the other. Faithfulness or loyalty simply means standing with or supporting a certain person, organization, or belief. Thus, being faithful or loyal to a leader is to stand with or support him/her at all times and in all circumstances. “Truthfulness” means saying and doing what is right in any situation. Hence, being truthful to a leader means saying what is right without being afraid of the leader at any time in any situation.

Many Christian leaders in Myanmar expect their followers to be faithful more than truthful. Leaders want their followers to be faithful to them in whatever situation. To justify this expectation of faithfulness, certain verses are often cited – those such as “The LORD rewards every man for his righteousness and faithfulness,” 1 Sam. 26:23 (NIV) and “you have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things,” Mt. 25:21, 23 (NIV). They seem to have no boundary between faithfulness to God and faithfulness to them. Can faithfulness stand alone without association with other elements such as mercy, justice, and truthfulness? Harry Blamires rightly asserts:

“Loyalty may be said evil in the sense that if any action is defended on the grounds of loyalty alone, it is defended on no rational grounds at all. “I do this out of loyalty to my leader” is irrational and amoral unless it is consequent upon, “my leader’s character, or purpose, or policy, is such that it ought to be supported”. Loyalty is in itself not a moral basis for action.”¹⁶

Faithfulness in the Bible is mainly found in God’s relationship with his people. It is defined as “maintaining faith or allegiance, showing a strong sense of duty or conscientiousness.”¹⁷ In the Old Testament, “faithfulness” frequently refers to God’s unwavering commitment to his promises.¹⁸ In human relations, faithfulness is mainly used in relation to fulfilling an office.¹⁹ For instance, Epaphras was mentioned as a faithful minister of Christ because the word “minister” is a particular class of co-workers who were active in preaching and teaching. Epaphras taught the truth of the gospel faithfully to the Colossians²⁰ In the parable of the talents in Mt. 25:14-30, Jesus Christ teaches about faithfulness, which is doing what we can with whatever God has given us. So faithfulness in the Bible is mainly in relation to God, to the ministry of the gospel, and to the gifts that God has entrusted to us.

As noted, the word “faithful” or “faithfulness” is basically employed in articulating an attribute of God and the relationship between him and his people. On a human level, “faithful” or “faithfulness” is used to describe a person’s unswerving commitment to God and the gospel of Jesus Christ. The word “loyalty,” rather than “faithfulness” is usually used when the Bible teaches about the friendship between human persons but “loyalty” sometimes points beyond human relationships to the relationship of God with his people, a relationship based on covenant.²¹ Loyalty is defined as “enduring commitment to a person over a long period of time, often with the implication of the commitment persisting in the face of obstacles that threaten

¹⁶ Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind*, (London: SPCK, 1963), pp. 23-24.

¹⁷ Stuart D. Sacks, “Faithfulness,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 764.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 765.

¹⁹ Ronald F. Youngblood, F. F. Bruce, and R. K. Harrison, Thomas Nelson Publishers, eds., *Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1995).

²⁰ Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 44, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 15.

²¹ Leland Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 519.

such endurance.”²² However, this essay uses faithfulness and loyalty interchangeably because these two are synonymous in the Burmese language. What is more, Christian leaders, when expecting their followers to be loyal to them, usually quote Scriptures, which talk about faithfulness, for example, 1 Sam. 26:23; Mt. 25:21;23.²³ Nonetheless, using “faithfulness” and “loyalty” interchangeably does not necessarily mean that these two overlapped biblically since their usage differs.

True, loyalty is also very important in leadership practices; without it, trust between the leaders and the led can hardly be established. But the question that we should tackle is, “Can loyalty stand alone?” As noted, loyalty or faithfulness does not stand alone because it is absurd to say, “We have to be loyal or faithful because the Bible teaches us to be loyal.” Faithfulness or loyalty to what or whom? Faithfulness is essentially relational; thus, other qualities always accompany it. For example, if a person is faithful to his or her leader, it must be accompanied by other essentials such as love and trust. Simply put, we are loyal to our leader because we trust and love him or her. However, if we are loyal to our leader for the sake of loyalty alone, an emotional linkage between the leader and the led may be lost. We will be passionless and robotic in following our leaders.

Besides, loyalty is not a one-dimensional but a two-way process since “followership”²⁴ is also as crucial as leadership. It is not just for followers who need to be loyal to their leaders. Leaders should also, in turn, be loyal to their followers. Theologically speaking, we are called to be faithful to God because He is faithful to us. Therefore, leaders who call followers to be faithful to them but fail to be faithful to their followers does not do justice to the biblical teaching since the God we

²² Ibid.

²³ It seems that Adoniram Judson noticed theologically different meanings of the two words: “faithfulness” and “loyalty.” For instance, 2 Sam. 2:5 in English Standard Version is translated as, “May you be blessed by the Lord, because you showed this **loyalty** to Saul your lord and buried.” But Judson, in translating the word “loyalty,” used Burmese word, **kyae zuu pyu**, which literally means “doing graceful thing.” Likewise, in Phil. 4:3 (NRSV), Paul regards his companion as “loyal.” But in Judson’s translation, the word “true” is used instead of “loyal.” Even though these two words, “loyalty” and “faithfulness” can be understood synonymously in Burmese, Judson translated them differently, not synonymously.

²⁴ The online Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “followership” as the capacity or willingness to follow a leader, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/followership>.

worship never fails to be faithful to us even though we often fail to be faithful. In this sense, loyalty is always a two-way process. Unfortunately, many Christian leaders in Myanmar see loyalty one-dimensionally; thus, they turn a blind eye to the two-dimensional nature of loyalty. Consequently, those Christian leaders unconsciously discard the vital role of truthfulness. This one-sidedness of loyalty at the cost of truthfulness triggers divisions, different kinds of conflict, and tensions.

In the spoke of leadership in Myanmar, the pole of faithfulness is bolted too tightly at the cost of another pole – truthfulness. Many leaders in Myanmar want their followers to be unswervingly loyal to them but not to be truthful with them if they make mistakes. They see truthfulness is seen as rude and rebellious, the opposite of loyalty. However, if we love and trust our leader, we cannot turn a blind eye to their mistakes, dishonesty, or selfish decisions. Loyalty at the cost of truthfulness is a slavish mentality, not loyalty anymore. This kind of slavish mindset is also a backbone of authoritarian culture in Myanmar.

More than that, loyalty is more than being loyal to a person. It includes loyalty to the vision or goals of the church or Christian institution where that person serves. There is an interdependence between leadership and followership. That is, where there is no followership, there is no leadership. Leaders need followers to achieve targets and goals. John McCallum argues that if leadership is important to performance, followership must have something to do with it too, because followership is the flip side of leadership.²⁵ Loyalty, therefore, is not to a leader alone, but to the goals and aims of the church or any Christian institution to which followers belong. McCallum, hence, points out that good followers have a strong allegiance and commitment to what the organization is trying to do. This loyalty to the organization and its goals is important, especially when there are relationship problems between a leader and their followers.²⁶ Thus, our understanding of leadership is incomplete if we do not recognize its unity with followership.²⁷ One

²⁵ John S. McCallum, "Followership: The Other Side of Leadership," *Ivey Business Journal* (September / October 2013), accessed Nov. 10, 2018 from: <https://iveybusinessjournal.com/publication/followership-the-other-side-of-leadership/>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Edwin P. Hollander, "The Essential Interdependence of Leadership and Followership," *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (April 1992): 74.

implication of this is to redress the balance between faithfulness and truthfulness. Redressing the balance of the spoke of faithfulness-versus-truthfulness will weaken in some measure the stronghold of authoritarianism in Myanmar, thereby creating an environment where leaders and followers learn to work together towards the vision and goals of their organization.

Family Structure vs. Body Cooperation

The third spoke of leadership in Myanmar is family-versus-body structure in running a local church or Christian institution. Here the family structure refers to a form of governance in which a leader or founder is regarded as a father figure and the others as his children. Body cooperation refers to everyone in an organization – whether a leader or the led – working together according to their roles for the good of the organization.

In Myanmar, the way in which families are organized is paternalistic – a father is a provider, protector, and decision-maker in most family matters. Most families in Myanmar are looked after, taken care of, nurtured, governed, and controlled by fathers who consider themselves as the head of the household. Whatever needs, such as financial, social, security, or religious needs crop up, all the family members look to the father to meet those needs. As the father is responsible for all their needs, he even directs for all aspects of their lives according to his plans and aspirations. No complaint or question is allowed for the decisions he makes. The leadership culture of Myanmar mirrors this family structure.

Many Christian leaders in Myanmar duplicate this style of family governance and lead their organizations, churches, denominations, and Bible schools in a paternalistic manner. It is so much a part of us that we are incapable of seeing the other pattern of leadership that the Scripture offers. The apostle Paul presents a model of relationships for husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and servants in the books of Ephesians and Colossians. John Stott in *The Message of Ephesians* and Dick Lucas in *The Message of Colossians* suggest that Paul uses the image of headship to instruct how husbands and wives in Ephesus and Colossus

should build the relationship between one another.²⁸ In fact, the Bible's pattern for administration is the body in which Christ Jesus is depicted as its head, and the rest are seen as His disciples. In this model, everyone (leaders and the led) in the body has a role to play. No single part of the body has a right to dominate others since Christ is the head. Because it is the same body, all parts are mutually dependent. Therefore, bringing the Myanmar family model into leadership is inappropriate and out of context.

The Scriptures also portray the church as the family of God. However, the father in this family is God himself. Everyone in his family, including leaders or founders, is identified as God's children. In contrast, the family structure that Christian leaders are practicing in Myanmar does not follow the biblical model of family, but a cultural adaptation of the family where the father is seen as the head. Simply put, the church in the Scripture is represented as the family of God, where Jesus is the head and we are his children.

Because of this cultural adaptation, many Christian leaders have unconsciously implemented a totalitarian style of leadership. The reason is that it is also one aspect passed on by Myanmar's cultural impact on Christian leadership. The Myanmar researcher, Cin Do Kham points out that "most Christian leaders in Myanmar have still valued the leadership style which was culturally and historically handed down."²⁹ Likewise, Vinay Samuel makes the same observation about Christian institutions in Asian countries, especially his own country India, noting that:

Many evangelical organizations in India are like families, defined by the prevailing cultural understanding of family, and are neither efficient nor are committed to mission. If the family dominates, then a similar paradigm to a caste model prevails. Castes preserve themselves and function by providing mutual uncritical support at all times. Too much questioning is not allowed, objective evaluation, innovation and

²⁸ John R. W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 213. R. C. Lucas, *Fullness & Freedom: The Message of Colossians & Philemon*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 157.

²⁹ Cin Do Kham, "Historical Values and Modes of Leadership in Myanmar: Assessment of roots of Values among Christian Leaders in Yangon," Ph. D. diss., Trinity International University, 1998, p.155.

creativity are sacrificed. Respect becomes an end in itself. All the leadership is in the hands of one group to preserve the identity of and keep control of the organization. Being family becomes the highest values, above the Kingdom and its mission.³⁰

In Myanmar, family ties are so strong that it would be risky and costly to go against it when a clash with his or her family breaks out. Once when I was teaching a course on “Personal Formation,” I set the following thought experimentation: Supposing you hold a good position at an office of a particular organization. There is a job vacancy in your office. That job opportunity is available for only one person, and it comes with a good salary. Out of a great number of applicants, only two are shortlisted. One has an excellent qualification and potential for the future of the organization. But the other is not as qualified as the first, but he/she is a relative of yours. You have the full authority to choose either one you like. Nobody will complain about your decision. In such a situation, which one would you select? The former or the latter? If you pick up the former, it would be better for your office. But if you choose the latter, you will be praised and honored among your relations, but it would not be as good for the organization. To my surprise, most students selected the latter. That experience brought home to me how the deeply nepotism is rooted in our culture.

There is a clash between relationship and effectiveness in the shame/honor culture of Myanmar. It is much worse for us to lose the favor of relatives than to fail to run a church or organization effectively. Such leadership leads us to nepotism and racial favoritism, which dominates not only churches and institutions in Myanmar but also political, social, and economic institutions. Is nepotism wrong? If it is wrong, should we not care for our relatives? Nepotism, needless to say, is deeply embedded in every institution in Myanmar, whether it is Christian or not. So we will explore if it is entirely wrong or not.

The word “nepotism” is originally derived from the Latin root *nepos*, meaning “nephew.”³¹ Webster’s International Dictionary (1976) defines it as “favoritism

³⁰ Quoted from Chris Sugden, *Gospel, Culture, and Transformation*, (New Delhi, India: Regnum Books International, 2001), 115-116.

³¹ Paul W. Sherman, “The Meaning of Nepotism,” *The American Naturalist*, Vol. 116, No. 4 (October 1980): 604.

shown nephews and other relatives.” In contrast, Adam Bellow argues that understanding nepotism etymologically from Latin *nepos* is misleading. For him, nepotism comes from the Italian word “nepotee,” which refers to almost any family member of any generation, male or female. In the fourteenth or fifteenth century, the word “nepotismo” was employed to describe the corrupt practice of appointing papal relatives (usually illegitimate sons described as nephews) to ecclesiastical jobs.³² However the nepotism that is typically practiced in Myanmar is not just hiring or promoting unqualified family members, but also acquaintances based on personal relationships or sycophancy. Thus, this essay adopts the definition given by Latoya Watson Haywood – nepotism as “the hiring or promoting of unqualified family members and acquaintances based on personal relationships.”³³ In nepotism, it does not matter how capable or not someone is of doing a job as long as he or she is a relative, friend, or sycophant of a business owner or a high-ranking officer. Likewise, what matters is not how capable and talented someone is at a particular skill, but to which race or whom he or she belongs. As we have grown accustomed to nepotism, we often no longer see it as evil.

An argument against nepotism can be proposed based on Paul’s teaching to Christians in Ephesus in 1 Tim 5:8, which says, *If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.* This verse clarifies that Christians are to care for their family and relatives but does it mean that we should take care of our family and relatives at the cost of others? The prevailing question among Christian ministers is whether family or ministry comes first. In fact, this question itself is problematic because it assumes a hierarchical perspective. The Bible teaches that family and ministry are both important. Instead of asking which one should come first, we should ask how both are equally important. Looking at the context of what Paul wrote, it is not Paul’s intention for Christians in Ephesus to provide for their families and relatives at the cost of other people. Instead, Paul explicitly instructs the Ephesian church to take care of the widows who are really in need and left all alone,

³² Quoted in Kevin J. Holt, “The Quiet Quandary: Navigating the Issue of Familial Hiring within the Church,” Anderson, Indiana: Doctor of Ministry Research Project, 5.

³³ Latoya Watson Haywood, “A Family Affair: A Quantitative Study on the Impact of Nepotism in the Workplace,” Doctor of Business Administration Thesis (Prescott, Arizona: The School of Business and Technology Management, 2018, 13.

Eph. 5:5. In Ephesus, there are different types of widows. Some widows have children or grandchildren, others who are really in need and left all alone. Some live for pleasure while others are faithful and devote themselves to all kinds of good deeds. Some younger widows are habitually idle and go about from house to house (see 1 Tim. 5: 4-6, 9-10, 11-13). A severe problem had arisen. People were not taking care of their parents, and the church took on the responsibility. This meant that the church was unable to care for those widows who were truly alone (v 16).³⁴ Therefore, Paul admonished them for their negligence, which was breaking the fifth commandment of the Lord. Suffice it to say that Paul did not give these instructions to the Ephesian church with the intention of promoting nepotism and racial favoritism. If he had, he would have contradicted everything he had said in many of his letters. Nepotism is not biblical teaching.

However, research in business shows that nepotism is not entirely wrong. Many scholars have discovered some positive outcomes of nepotism in spite of the many negative consequences. For example, the most commonly observed benefits of nepotism are that it fosters exceptional dedication among employees, promotes a feeling of solidarity and sense of ownership, and incites great loyalty and long-term commitment to the business.³⁵ However, other research sheds light on the consequences of nepotism, noting that it

resulted in lower perceptions of being attracted to the organization, decreased the level of trust in the organization and resulted in lower perception of psychological contract with the organization. Most of all, nepotistic practices may suffer from a potential loss of high quality applicants who are not attracted to the organization and that the organization can be considered untrustworthy and not advance individuals through the organizations as expected or promised.³⁶

³⁴ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, vol. 46, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2000), 285.

³⁵ Quoted in Gina M. Finelli, "From the Dinner Table to the Boardroom: The Effects of Nepotism on Family Business" (PhD dissertation, Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences, American University, 2011), 49.

³⁶ Rabiah Sahara Muhammad, "Bringing Along the Family: Nepotism in the Workplace," MA Thesis (The Graduate School of the University of Maryland, 2011), 43.

To compare the negative and positive outcomes of nepotism, the positive ones are dedication, solidarity, and loyalty, and long-term commitment, whereas the negative effects are distrust, lower psychological contract, the loss of quality, the untrustworthiness of the organization. The risk is that positive outcomes, if not properly managed, can support an authoritarian culture. In the nepotistic context, a close affinity is treasured more highly than quality. The best positions in business are restricted to our next of kin. If there is no relative who could succeed in the business, the place would be strictly for sycophants and flatterers. In that sense, the nepotism that we practice in Myanmar is a backbone to reinforce the structure of authoritarian administration.

So what does the polarization of family-over-body structure bring about? Generally, there are two products of polarization. First, the structure of paternalistic leadership underpins the dictatorial governance in Myanmar. Followers are regarded as children and the leader as a father figure. We are to obey our leaders, whether we want to or not. Obedience and loyalty become the criteria for assessing whether a certain follower is a good Christian. When that follower becomes a leader, that person practices the same type of leadership. Eventually, we become trapped in the vicious circle of this paternalistic leadership. Second, this polarization of family-over-body structure has a tendency to enthrone nepotism above everything and nepotism, in turn, treasures kinship and social ties over competence, qualities, skill, and ability. Such a nepotistic culture will rarely produce quality professionals. Instead, it will produce mediocre men and women.

Biblically speaking, the church as the family of God best depicts the relationship that God built through Christ Jesus among all believers irrespective of cultural and racial differences. The relationship in God's family breaks down all social, racial, and cultural discrimination. Whether clergy or laity, everyone is equal in God's sight. The symbol of God's family is a vivid representation of the relationship between believers. In terms of administration, the apostle Paul represents the church as the body of Christ in which every part, though playing diverse roles, is equally important. Therefore, in the spoke of family-versus-body structure, many Christian leaders tighten the family pole at the cost of the body. As noted, the family pole represents the relationship between the leader and the led while the body pole stands

for cooperation. Both are important, respectively, so one should not be screwed tighter than the other to avoid the leadership wheel becoming twisted and unable to roll smoothly.

Concluding Comments

As discussed, the key to avoiding polarization lies in retaining the balance of the spokes of the leadership wheel in Myanmar. The two poles in each spoke need to be screwed proportionately, not one tightened over the other because, for each pole, all spokes are crucial. Put simply, obedience and creativity, faithfulness and truthfulness, and family and body structure play vital roles in rolling the leadership wheel; therefore, no pole should be tightened at the expense of the other. The choice is not either/or obedience or creativity, faithfulness or truthfulness, and family or body structure, but how to set each pole with balance. To summarize, I have made two comments in this essay.

Renewing the way of thinking is the first and foremost rudiment in transforming the old pattern of leadership. The polarities, which I have mentioned above, turn into polarization, perhaps, because of an either-or thinking pattern. It seems impossible to disintegrate an integrally connected thing and put one thing over another. Yet, obedience and creativity are two separate essential qualities which the Bible clearly teaches, so it is not right to ask which – obedience or creativity is more crucial than the other. It is not either obedience or creativity. Instead, we must think through the lens of “both obedience and creativity.” Just as the Bible does not teach blind and unquestioning obedience to our leaders at the cost of creativity, so also the Bible does not regard obedience to our leaders as otiose. No leadership happens unless there is obedience. Leadership that disregards obedience is no longer leadership but anarchy or laissez-faire. The spokes of the leadership wheel in Myanmar are twisted because of one-sided polarization. The spoke of obedience-versus-creativity has become a leadership paradox in Myanmar. The question which present leaders in Myanmar are faced with is, “How should we maintain a good balance in screwing each pole of the spokes of the leadership wheel?”

Second, the cultural captivity of Christianity in Myanmar is a most basic problem in practicing leadership. Christianity in Myanmar has been co-opted by and

conforms to the values and standards of the surrounding culture. The key issues are unquestioning obedience and unswerving loyalty to leaders. They cause a loss of truthfulness, nepotism, and an incorrect view of the leader as a father figure. Christians in Myanmar consciously or unconsciously hold good the values and standards of the culture, thereby becoming culturally captive in the way they practice leadership. Christians, whether in the West or East, can easily become cultural captives unless we examine ourselves carefully and thoughtfully in light of the biblical teachings. After working as a missionary in India for forty years, Lesslie Newbigin came to see the cultural captivity of the gospel in Western countries, that is, seeing religion as private, inner beliefs and values, has and as having no right to interfere with public affairs.³⁷ A quite recent book, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity*, examines how Christianity in the West is marked by individualism, consumerism and materialism, and racism.³⁸ However, this discussion targets how Christians in Myanmar have become seriously culturally captive in practicing leadership.

An understanding of cultural captivity can awaken Christians in Myanmar to discern the social factors that condition how we do things. All Burmese citizens, irrespective of religious ethnic differences, live under the same cultural roof. In such a context, Christians are, to a smaller or greater degree, influenced by the surrounding cultural values and beliefs both consciously and unconsciously. Christians need to see that they are not distinct from other faith communities. The problem is not just “them” but “us.” We cannot exonerate ourselves by saying that “they” constructed this leadership culture. Is the onus of this leadership culture on them alone? A Burmese political analyst, Min Zin, reflecting on Aung San Suu Kyi’s idea of revolution of the spirit, rightly points out that

...one of the reasons we haven’t beaten the (then) regime is that they seem to be a part of our national character...When we look at the mirror

³⁷ Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season: Perspective on Christian World Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), see the chapter on “The Cultural Captivity of Western Christianity as a Challenge to a Missionary Church.”

³⁸ Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009). Another book that discusses this subject at greater length is, Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004).

of military dictatorship carefully, we can find out some parts of our face. We can see some character traits, such as narrow mindedness, factionalism, jealousy, bias, intolerance, aggressiveness, arrogance, conceit, prejudice, hypocrisy, irresponsibility, blame, the unwillingness to compromise and personal attacks.³⁹

What Min Zin said is true not only of Burmese politicians but also of Christians in Myanmar. Cin Do Kham indicates that Christian leaders in Myanmar “conceptually understand the teachings of Jesus for servant leadership; however, the socio-cultural and historical values have been rooted so deeply in the society that the cost to break that circle will be too high.”⁴⁰ So what? What is so evident is that Christians in Myanmar cannot exonerate themselves from all problems that this leadership culture has produced. Put simply, Christians cannot claim that they have nothing to do with this leadership culture. Despite our repugnance for the military dictatorship, many Christian leaders imitate and reproduce the same leadership style in leading God’s people in churches, organizations, and institutions.

To conclude, leadership is largely the art of securing the spokes of the wheel in a balanced manner so that leaders can roll it to reach the desired end. For this, we need a way of thinking, which is not either-or (either obedience or creativity, faithfulness or truthfulness, family or body structure) but a paradoxical way of both-and thinking. That is, we do not polarize obedience over creativity, faithfulness over truthfulness, or family over body administration and vice versa. Sacrificing one for the sake of others will distort the leadership wheel, and as a consequence, it will heighten the culture of despotic leadership. Besides changing our way of thinking in leadership, what Christians in Myanmar have to tackle is cultural captivity, which is subtler than we can imagine because our thoughts themselves are often culturally shaped. Ethnic and religious differences exonerate no single Christian from the responsibility for such a leadership culture. Although many Christians know the biblical teaching of servant leadership, we have not followed that pattern because of the strong dominance of the despotic leadership culture. Thus, Christians in

³⁹ Min Zin, “Spiritual Revolution,” *The Irrawaddy*, vol. 7, no. 2 (February 1999), accessed 20 October 2018 from http://www2.irrawaddy.com/article.php?art_id=1064&page=1.

⁴⁰ Cin Do Kham, “Historical Values and Modes of Leadership in Myanmar: Assessment of Roots of Values among Christian Leaders in Yangon,” (PhD thesis, Deerfield, IL: Trinity International University, 1998), 159.

Myanmar who are aware of cultural captivity can maintain balance by screwing each pole of the spokes of the leadership wheel in Myanmar. This will enable Christian leaders in Myanmar to roll the wheel smoothly and skillfully to lead their people in the desired direction. This would bring about a leadership revolution in Myanmar.