

## Governance Egalitarianism in Jesus' Teaching

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*Governance egalitarianism has been defined as a situation where all members of an organization have something approximating equal say in determining policy of the group. Nowadays, it is practiced mainly in worker cooperatives, and in some voluntary organizations, like amateur sports and recreation clubs. It has been alleged that Jesus encouraged governance egalitarianism within his movement, but this contention has been challenged. This paper revisits the matter, looks at earlier arguments, and examines scriptural material relevant to the issue. On the basis of reassessing the arguments, and of Jesus' alleged sayings and behavior as interpreted by Matthew, the conclusion is that Jesus did seek to mould a movement in which he expected his followers to practice governance egalitarianism among themselves. That people of different status coexisted within the Jesus movement does not tell against the conclusion. Nor do arguments that Jesus sought to foster this mode of governance in a patriarchal society undermine the judgment, although the role of women in the Jesus movement is not examined.*

### *Introduction*

It has been claimed that Jesus sought to construct a community or church of equals. By this is meant a “democratic decision-making assembly of equals,” as counterposed to “the structures of domination

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and exclusion that are institutionalized in Greco-Roman patriarchy.”<sup>1</sup> If this contention is valid, the church can be regarded as the precursor and model for the new creation at Jesus’ Second Coming. Proponents of this view hold the model to be the archetype of community intended to characterize social organization in general, seeking to function according to the guidelines Jesus establishes. Governance egalitarianism does not preclude the existence of leaders within the group. These might be appointed by Jesus, or, after Easter, by election, consensual agreement, or lot within the community itself. An analogy with modern governance egalitarianism might be made. In worker cooperatives, where governance egalitarianism prevails, managers may be appointed by the workforce, exercising given authority within the workplace, but subject to recall by the workforce. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza puts it that “leadership functions” are compatible with “decentralized horizontal social structures.”<sup>2</sup>

### *Defining Terms*

Jesus never said that he aimed to form a community of equals, nor did he explicitly advocate egalitarianism. Few equality-related terms occur in scripture, and no operational models of egalitarianism existed in first-century Palestine.

An understanding of what egalitarianism means has to be approached by using modern categories. To what extent these relate to biblical construals is the issue. This is a methodology compatible with the *social scientific* approach to biblical interpretation. Here, “a suitable model accepted in the social-scientific community” is selected, then the model is used “to form adequate scenarios from reading the document in question.”<sup>3</sup> The models used here are contemporary understandings of equality, egalitarian, governance egalitarianism, hierarchy, and status.

Deductions of governance egalitarianism in the Jesus movement are sometimes derived from the idea of status reversal that features

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals* (London: SCM, 1993), 105–106. See also Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2005), 110.

<sup>2</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 106.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce J. Malina, “Social-Scientific Methods in Historical Jesus Research,” in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina, and Gerd Theissen (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2002), 3–26, at 3.

so prominently in Jesus' teaching, and that has been described as one of the core themes of biblical faith.<sup>4</sup> The claim is that Jesus advocated status reversal in his community, that renunciation of status is a model Jesus presents to the world, thereby creating a community in which people were treated equally, without discrimination between them. At the least, this assertion requires a definition of status. Today, status measures a person's standing or position in relation to others in an organization or group. In this way, status is closely related to honor or prestige. Rank is akin to status, indicating a place on a scale, or in a graded body. According to Alex Law, "Status groups depend on highly restricted and internally regulated forms of social intercourse."<sup>5</sup>

Gerd Theissen suggests that "this [status] motif was called humility" in earlier times, the "willingness on the part of those of high rank to serve others." If "every human encounter between great and small requires the great to come down to the level of the small," as in Jesus' group, how far is this possible in hierarchical groups? One view is that it is not possible, requiring change in the way power and authority are exercised in organizations. The issue, therefore, is how far Jesus' teaching that each member of the Christian community "must be ready to be everyone's servant"<sup>6</sup> implies the desirability of suppression of hierarchy, and thereby governance egalitarianism, within the community. Does Jesus' instruction stop short at personal behavior, or does it suggest how groups should be organized? In one view, structural change is required, with members of the community having equal say in management and executive policymaking. The question of this paper is whether it can be established that Jesus intended his followers to function in this egalitarian manner of decision-making.

Sources today suggest that equality and egalitarianism have no fixed meaning because they are not natural attributes but social constructions. Equality can be constituted by a range of attributes, so that no single definition is able to encompass all its features.<sup>7</sup> However defined, complete or absolute equality between human beings is not realizable in the world. This is because people differ in natural

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<sup>4</sup> Gerd Theissen, *The Bible and Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2007), 63.

<sup>5</sup> Alex Law, *Key Concepts in Classical Social Theory* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage, 2011), 45.

<sup>6</sup> Theissen, *The Bible and Contemporary Culture*, 63–64.

<sup>7</sup> See Martin Marger, *Social Inequality: Patterns and Processes*, second edition (Boston, Mass.: McGraw Hill, 2002).

aptitudes, like intelligence, personality, ability, and strength, and in life experiences that partly affect personal values. Accordingly, David Miller suggests that “there is no agreed answer to the question ‘In what respect should people be judged more or less equal?’”<sup>8</sup> Douglas Hicks expresses the problem that various “currencies” exist within which equality can be construed:<sup>9</sup> for example, greater equality in the distribution of access to power and authority, in levels of income and wealth, in access to health care, in identification of social status, and so on. Consequently, equality can be thought of as a multidimensional term, not a unitary concept, or a given range of qualities that will always coexist, for “there are multiple dimensions to inequality.”<sup>10</sup> Egalitarians may advocate equality in some attributes, but not others.

Even if equality were to be indicated by identity—by sameness or likeness in size, quality, value, rank, ability, degree, status, or merit with respect to a particular attribute—few egalitarians advocate that this goal should be sought completely for the attribute. No contemporary egalitarian argues that to be an egalitarian involves advocating egalitarianism in all these qualities. At most, an egalitarian promotes movement toward equality-related qualities in some of these areas. Miller expresses it that “strict equality of outcome is not a fundamental value even for those who are most egalitarian in outlook.”<sup>11</sup> As noted above, absolute likeness or uniformity in outcome gives no credence to human variability, difference, and the exercise of human freedom. People are not identical, and do not necessarily make the same choices when confronted with alternative courses of action. This applies even where people have similar levels of material welfare.

A second deduction from recent discussion is that contemporary advocates of egalitarianism or equality of outcome argue for similarity or comparability, particularly in ensuring that basic human needs are met. Thus, while some disparities in the distribution of power and authority, or wealth and income might be acceptable to egalitarians,

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<sup>8</sup> David Miller, “Equality and Inequality,” in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Social Thought*, second edition, ed. William Outhwaite (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003), 205.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas A. Hicks, *Inequality and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Lars Osberg, “Inequality,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 11, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001), 7376.

<sup>11</sup> Miller, “Equality and Inequality,” 205.

these should not be too great (contrary to the situation in most nations of the world today). Accordingly, "most, if not all egalitarians believe that the distribution of wealth over the whole of society should be more equal than it is, or ever has been."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Lane Kenworthy holds that "low inequality" can be used as a synonym for "equality," because "few if any egalitarians favor perfect equality of outcomes."<sup>13</sup> A reasonable inference is that "complete equality among persons being impossible, the real meaning of the idea is reduction or amelioration of inequality."<sup>14</sup> Somebody can be labelled an egalitarian if they advocate movement toward greater evenness in the distribution of some attribute in question, such as authority, power, status, wealth, or income. They may not advocate greater likeness in all attributes, and they certainly do not advocate the elimination of all social and economic stratification. This view does not accord with ideas of equality as involving exact sameness or similarity. Similarity does not involve elimination of difference.

A summary of the above is that equality is a multidimensional term, no fixed definition exists, and no egalitarian advocates complete equality in any attribute or a range of attributes by which "equalness" might be measured. Instead, a person can be labelled an egalitarian if he or she favors a reduction in inequality in a few or more attributes such as status, power, or authority. How the notion of egalitarian relates to issues of status, rank, or position, and to authority/domination and hierarchical structures within the Jesus movement is pursued below.

The question is to what extent were the hierarchy- and equality-related concepts above reflected in Jesus' movement? One claim is Schüssler Fiorenza's assertion that "the lordship of Christ categorically rules out any relationship of dominance within the Christian community."<sup>15</sup> This means outside Jesus himself, for he is the disciples' theocentric leader. Less clear is Theissen, who suggests that "treat[ing] others without regard to their status is the only path to

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Schneider, *The Distribution of Wealth* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2004), 87.

<sup>13</sup> Lane Kenworthy, *Jobs with Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Nagel, "Equality," in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 248.

<sup>15</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 176.

hierarchies with fundamental equality.”<sup>16</sup> This seems unlikely, for hierarchy is usually understood as the antithesis of equality. Hierarchy is a system of the identifiable, graded ordering of some attribute within an organization or group. The existence of a hierarchy presumes the exercise of coercive power and/or authority within the organization. Power or domination has been defined sociologically as “the exercise of constraint and compulsion against the will of an individual or group.”<sup>17</sup> Authority, in dictionary definitions, is synonymous with power, as the right to enforce obedience, “the right to control, command, or determine.”<sup>18</sup> The graded order of hierarchy in a group is likely to be based on role–task specification, with the upper graded orders exercising power and authority over those at lower levels. It seems unlikely that with hierarchies people would be treated “without regard to their status,” as Theissen puts it above. Hierarchies based on the exercise of power and authority probably require differential status in terms of how the upper group relates to the lower. Whether these qualities were practiced or encouraged in Jesus’ new community is at issue. Were forms of power, domination, coercion, authority, hierarchy, rank, or status practiced and fostered in Jesus’ movement?

Whether Jesus sought members of his movement with different social standing and economic condition to play a comparable role with each other in helping determine policy for the movement is investigated in the next section. This is the question even though each member might have a different function or different level of knowledge. “Member” is not the best word, for it implies a prescribed adherence to a formal organization, and that is not how the Jesus movement functioned. Within the movement, difference in social and economic standing might persist, but if, after Jesus’ death, decisions were to be made by the group as a whole then governance egalitarianism would exist. Perhaps in the case of division, majority rule would be practiced, dependent on prayer. The contemporary Quaker idea of “standing aside” might have been practiced. Governance egalitarianism need not imply that all community members are equal in social standing and prestige within the movement, but only with how decision-making authority was structured within it.

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<sup>16</sup> Theissen, *The Bible and Contemporary Culture*, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill, and Bryan S. Turner, *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, fifth edition (London: Penguin, 2006), 24.

<sup>18</sup> *Macquarie Encyclopedic Dictionary* (Sydney: Macquarie Library, 1990), 56.

Nor does it presume that each adherent had identical power and authority to the others. In contemporary organizations structured on the basis of governance egalitarianism, such as amateur sports and recreation clubs, some members will have more ability and drive than others. There will be better players, those better at administration, those prepared to put in more time than others. But all members have equal say in running the club, even though some will be delegated to administrative office and therefore likely to carry more authority in specific areas than others. The club treasurer, for example, will have authority to collect members' fees and to prepare financial statements, perhaps to form a financial subcommittee. The matter below is whether those who joined Jesus' movement and were recognized as Jesus' followers entered an association that bore some of the stamps above in how Jesus intended the group to function. At issue is how the group was to function after Jesus' death, for while he was alive, Jesus was the theocentric leader.

### *Reversal or Elimination of Status?*

A caution is necessary before the Matthean text is analyzed. The scope of the argument cannot be overstated, for it aims only to establish an element in the teaching of the Matthean Jesus. Hopefully, the exegesis of the Matthean texts is sustainable, even if it is not conclusive. Further, no claim is made that the Matthean texts examined represent the authentic teaching of Jesus. This would require offering reasons for treating the cited passages as authentic, including going beyond Matthew, which this paper does not do. Even so, the mode of treatment here does open further questions as to how much is Jesus' thought and how much is Matthew's interpretation of Jesus, and how all this is reflected elsewhere in early Christian writings. As things stand, the investigation here is fruitful in terms of further questions for research.

Arguments for and against governance egalitarianism in Jesus' movement are often related to seven reversal-of-status texts Jesus reportedly said concerning interpersonal relations among his followers: Mark 9:35–37 // Matthew 18:1–5 // Luke 9:46–48; Mark 10:41–45 // Matthew 20:25–28 // Luke 22:24–27; and Matthew 23:8–12. Consistent with our definition of status above, how these texts relate to standing or position in relation to others in Jesus' movement is the issue. There is not space to consider all the texts, so we will consider



only the three in Matthew. In Matthew 23:8–12, Jesus instructs his disciples that they “are not to be called rabbi” (v. 8) and tells them that “the greatest among you will be your servant” (v. 11). Jesus does not state how this greatness is measured or reached, so we do not know how “greatest” was to be assessed. Jesus gives no definition of standing or position by which status might be determined. Probably, in Jesus’ thinking, the only judge of what is great is God. Anybody in the Jesus group might find some criterion by which to judge “greatness,” either of themselves or of others, such as by prestige, standing, status, or rank, but they would not find Jesus expressing his admiration for this evaluation. However, if anybody proclaimed themselves as “greatest,” they should/will become servants. Suppose “greatest” was equated with the physically strongest in the group, and this influenced position or privilege. The physically strongest in Jesus’ plan should then become the servants of the group. A reversal of status and ranking is required.

However, the inference of this passage does not stop at reversal of status. Jesus is saying that no criterion of “greatness” is acceptable by which his followers should assess each other. Whatever criterion of “greatness” is posed will or should be removed from those who assume it, rendering them servants. A doing away with any humanly-assessed “greatness” status criterion at all seems to be inferred, rather than reversal. Verse 12 consolidates this interpretation, that “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Like verse 11, the first clause of verse 12 suggests a constraint on self-professed/self-posed greatness and exaltation, with the exalted being “humbled.” Yet, simultaneously in the second clause of verse 12, “all who humble themselves will be exalted.” If these people who are “exalted” then demand privilege, power, and control over others—let it go to their heads, as it were—they in turn will be humbled, according to the first clause of verse 12. Given human sinfulness, perhaps a fair chance exists that whoever is exalted, on whatever criterion, might drift into this position. In any case, whoever is exalted to become greatest, as verse 11 explains, will not enjoy that power long because they will become the servant of the group. Reversals are going on all the time, leading to no fixed reversal state being achieved. Preferably, the exalted/great and humble would exist in a state of continuous flux; position and privilege relations would be constantly rendered topsy-turvy. Elimination of hierarchy and status



rather than permanent reversal seems to be a more apt description of how Jesus sees desirable relationships in his movement, as far as Matthew 23:11–12 is concerned. If status measures a person's standing or position in relation to others in an organization or group, Matthew 23:8–12 suggests that Jesus wanted it done away with in his movement. This is very like how modern amateur sports/recreation clubs function. Nobody in a club regards any other member as above or below them in rank or station. If the club is to work well, all members pull together on a basis of equal input, subject to difference in human ability.

Biblical exegetes are sympathetic to the argument above. For instance, Ulrich Luz interprets Matthew 23:8–12 as saying that only one hierarchical authority should exist in Jesus' movement, "namely, God and the exalted Christ," so that "all members of the church are equal." Life in the movement would be destroyed by "human striving for greatness," which instead should be characterized by "equality and solidarity." Indeed, for Luz, "what Matthew had in mind was a "church without higher and lower members, a church of serving, a church of equals," without hierarchy of any kind, but "only reciprocal service."<sup>19</sup> True greatness is measured by the willingness of believers to serve one another, with the greatest being the one who is servant of all.<sup>20</sup> John Nolland sees Matthew 23:11–12 as consonant with Jesus' persistent criticism of status within his movement, whereas "self-humbling before God and the Christian community" is the true measure of greatness.<sup>21</sup> Only a community striving for nil-hierarchy and equality in a diversity of areas could pursue these practices and standards. A more restricted judgment on Matthew 23:8–12 is that "it represents a limited 'egalitarian' ideology that approximates the ideal of a composite autonomous group."<sup>22</sup>

Matthew 23:8–12 suggests that Jesus sought to forestall and eliminate a hierarchy of decision-making within his community, that it was to be characterized by a non-hierarchical mode of governance. One

<sup>19</sup> Luz, *Matthew* 21–28, 107, 110.

<sup>20</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, *Matthew*, Bible Student's Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1987), 425.

<sup>21</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 929.

<sup>22</sup> Dennis C. Duling, "'Egalitarian' Ideology, Leadership, and Factional Conflict within the Matthean Group," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27 (November 1997): 134.

objection to this construal is the claim that Jesus' saying cited above speaks not of the elimination of stratified roles, but only of their reversal. John Elliott claims that "reversion is the inversion of existing positions of status rather the eradication of stratification altogether," that Jesus (and Paul) "understood the reversal of status not as the elimination of status but as the inversion and relativizing of status."<sup>23</sup> What "relativizing" means is not clear, but it could be understood to mean reducing differences between status levels. This understanding is strengthened because Elliott maintains that "conventional differences" such as economic disparities were "relativized," in the sense that "the differences no longer determined who had direct access to God."<sup>24</sup> If this were true, it means that all members of the church had equality of opportunity in access to God. Economic disparities and other differences no longer stood in the way of reaching God. If Elliott is right, one important dimension of equality characterized the church: equality of opportunity to be God's children.

Another text relevant to governance matters is Matthew 20:25–28 (// Mark 10:41–45 and Luke 22:24–27). Jesus draws a contrast between Gentile rulers who "lord" it over their subjects, and how it should be among his followers. This Gentile manner of ruling is not to be so within Jesus' community; instead, an opposite mode of operation is required. The saying is directed at Jesus' disciples, in which verses 26–28 capture the element important for the argument: "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." No positions of status remain, for mutual service is paramount. *The New Oxford Annotated NRSV* comments in relation to Mark 10:41–45 that "in contrast to the imperial practices of the nations, there will be no rulers in Jesus' movement or communities!"<sup>25</sup>

Consider how selected biblical exegetes understand Matthew 20:25–28. Luz suggests that it "simply implies that within the church there should not be any 'being great' and 'being first' at all"; rather, he claims, "the desire to be great is itself to be eliminated." Indeed,

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<sup>23</sup> John H. Elliott, "The Jesus Movement Was Not Egalitarian but Family-oriented," *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2003): 192, 194.

<sup>24</sup> Elliott, "The Jesus Movement," 204–205.

<sup>25</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 78 NT.

Luz asserts, "For Matthew the church's service structure means abandoning every authority structure in the church."<sup>26</sup> Eliminating "every authority structure" can only imply egalitarian governance within the group. If the church as the body of believers is the socio-organizational model for the new kingdom, egalitarianism is also the exemplar for the wider society. Inferences Craig Blomberg draws from verses 26–27 are similar, that "Jesus' entire thrust is on enabling and empowering others rather than wielding power for oneself."<sup>27</sup> If all participants in a group are enabled and empowered so that the initiator of the group gives up power and status—as happened after Jesus' death—a flat or egalitarian organizational authority structure would be generated within the group. In this way, "the church is to be a counterculture within culture, not a poor imitation of [secular] culture."<sup>28</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated NSRV* notes similar conclusions for Mark 10:32–45, as showing Jesus' "exhortation on egalitarian social-political relations in the [Jesus] movement and its communities."<sup>29</sup> These interpretations by the exegetes and scholars can be understood as indicating elimination of authority structures within the Jesus movement. In the preceding texts, Jesus is going a long way further than just reversing or inverting status roles in the church. He is proclaiming governance egalitarianism. No inference emerges that Jesus' mode of governance was confined to relativizing disparities, if this means reducing, not eliminating them.

The last Matthean text relevant to these issues is 18:1–5 (// Mark 9:35–37 and Luke 9:46–48). The disciples ask "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus responds by calling a child and telling them that they have to change and become like children: "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Imposing modern models of the meaning of humility on Jesus' statement infers that the disciples have to become meek, without pride, low in station, grade, or importance, of modest self-importance,

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<sup>26</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2001), 544, 545, 546.

<sup>27</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1992), 308.

<sup>28</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 2: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28*, revised and expanded edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 332.

<sup>29</sup> *New Oxford Annotated Bible: NRSV*, 77 NT.

with a low estimate of their own importance. Their personal behavior has to change to reach these qualities. But is that the end of the matter? This is unlikely, because the personal change required would probably depend on the organizational structure in which they worked. That is, mutual interaction occurs between the structure and the behavior: “the text refers both to the external condition and to the internal attitude.”<sup>30</sup>

Along similar lines, Robert Smith asks in his commentary on Matthew, “How is life in a really new community to be ordered?”<sup>31</sup> Consistent with the two Matthean texts above, the personal behavioral changes desired by Jesus would be encouraged in the movement if they did not depend on hierarchical structure, involving the exercise of top-down power and authority. Instead, Jesus sought to have his disciples relate to each other from a position of low station, without superiors, disregarding status. A desire or ability to exercise authority over others is proscribed. The disciples are to become “small, insignificant, and without power”; they are to “abandon thoughts of personal status and to accept or even seek a place at the bottom of the pecking order.”<sup>32</sup> The three Matthean texts examined above give a strong presumption that Jesus sought to encourage governance egalitarianism within his movement.

Jesus picked twelve disciples to spend three years of their lives with him. They were given the ability to cast out demons and heal, which Jesus’ other followers possessed only in restricted circumstances. While the Twelve were given greater powers of healing and preaching than the rest and different functions, they did not appear to enjoy greater decision-making authority within the movement. Just as in modern amateur sports/recreation clubs, the Twelve were the better “players.” But they were not given power, as defined above, over Jesus’ other followers, nor did they exhibit superior rank or position to others in Jesus’ movement. There is no evidence that Jesus ever treated them in a way that would afford higher social status to any disciple, or in a manner that would reflect their higher social

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<sup>30</sup> Luz, *Matthew* 8–20, 237.

<sup>31</sup> Robert H. Smith, *Matthew*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg, 1989), 217.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), 264; Richard T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 678.

standing. The Twelve did not come from a particular social group or class different from the bulk of the followers. They are not depicted as having greater societal value, or enjoying greater favors. It cannot be deduced or inferred that they possessed these qualities.

The twelve apostles Jesus selected (Luke 6:13–16) were probably “honored guarantors of the tradition.” This does not mean that Jesus assigned or ascribed “precedence” to them (against Elliott),<sup>33</sup> if precedence means being accorded superiority, given preference, and afforded priority. Jesus says little about what role the apostles, as distinct from his other followers, were to be given in his movement, or how they were to be regarded. Certainly, they were not to be called “father” (as might be expected in a surrogate family based on patriarchy), rabbi, or instructor (Matt. 23:8–10). Even if Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (or their followers) wrote the Gospels, this does not mean that they had or earned higher status because of their writings. Even though Jesus sought to subjugate hierarchical authority within his movement, he did not encourage each of his followers to perform identical tasks. Suppression of hierarchy and equality did (and does) not mean identity. Jesus favored specialization and division of labor among his followers to maximize the impact of his teaching.

Dennis Duling holds that in the Matthean group “implied status [is] occasionally granted to apostles, prophets, and teachers.”<sup>34</sup> None of Duling’s citations mentioning prophets apply to life within the Matthean group, being all from former times. If these people did exist in the Matthean group, perhaps as those sent out as envoys to proclaim the word, it says nothing about them being of higher status than others in the group. There is no evidence that they had greater standing, position, honor, or prestige compared with others in the group, nor that they had predominant authority. Even if Andrew Overman is correct that some in the Matthean group were “trying to keep up with the Jewish leadership in position and prestige roles of leadership and their corresponding titles,”<sup>35</sup> this tendency is rejected by Jesus and by Matthew.

A counter to the thesis above might be the account of Simon Peter’s confession and the giving to him “the keys of the kingdom of

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<sup>33</sup> Elliott, “The Jesus Movement,” 201.

<sup>34</sup> Duling, “‘Egalitarian’ Ideology,” 131.

<sup>35</sup> J. Andrew Overman, *Matthew’s Gospel and Formative Judaism: The Social World of the Matthean Community* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1990), 123.

heaven” (Matthew 16:16–19), perhaps meaning that Peter had the highest ranking or status among the disciples. To say with Duling that “leaders are those who have status in a group of followers”<sup>36</sup> says nothing about what lines of authority exist, what makes up that status, or how it is exercised. No evidence exists, for example, that managers in worker cooperatives today are regarded by the rest of the workforce as superior in rank or prestige. Nor is there textual evidence that a publicly recognized scale or hierarchy of social worth constituting status existed in Jesus’ movement. Duling interpreted Matthew 16:16–19 as showing “the transference of teaching authority to Peter,”<sup>37</sup> and thereby as evidence of hierarchy among Jesus’ followers. A different emphasis is Frederick Dale Bruner’s, that while “Jesus honors the actual person of Peter here and makes him foundational in the church,” it is “Peter’s *faith and confession*” that is being honored, especially as all the disciples had already made a similar confession in Matthew 14:33. Therefore, “Matthew’s text says nothing of Peter that could not be said of *all* christocentric disciples,” such as the “binding” and “loosing” repeated in Matthew 18:18.<sup>38</sup> For Luz, this is “the authority of every disciple and every community”; in this sense, then, “the historical Peter [is represented] in every disciple.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, to Craig Keener, “Jesus gives Peter—and those who share his proclamation of Jesus’ identity—authority in the kingdom.”<sup>40</sup> Finally, Robert Smith suggests that “it is grotesque to imagine that Matthew was interested in promoting any office, norm, or authority in addition to the words of Jesus.”<sup>41</sup> None of this is to deny that Peter had a leading role among the Twelve and in the community, but the four Protestant interpreters do not read Matthew 16:16–19 as involving the transference of teaching authority to Peter. It is the resurrected life and words of Jesus that serve as authority in the movement.

There are other reversal texts that do not relate to how Jesus wanted his movement organized in the present age. Examples are the Sermons on the Mount and the Plain, the first-and-last texts, and the rich man and Lazarus. These concern the nature of social

<sup>36</sup> Duling, “‘Egalitarian’ Ideology,” 124.

<sup>37</sup> Duling, “‘Egalitarian’ Ideology,” 131.

<sup>38</sup> Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, 127, 131.

<sup>39</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 365, 376.

<sup>40</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 429.

<sup>41</sup> Smith, *Matthew*, 203.

organization on Jesus' Second Coming, involving the reversal of the economic condition of poor and rich, a similar theme to the rich man and Lazarus. In the kingdom of heaven, differential rewards will be made, but they do not relate to the present age. The claim that Jesus "focused on the nature and imminence of God's reign symbolized as royal monarchical rule"<sup>42</sup> does not tell against governance egalitarianism within his movement in the present age. There were two different aspects of Jesus' proclamation, the ultimate and the interim. The ultimate situation would be God as "king" and God's rule as "kingdom." God triune would be ruler, and how far differentials in authority existed between his subjects is unclear. That Jesus used the word "kingdom" to describe God's imminent reign says nothing about how God's subjects might exist in relation to each other in the interim.

The more equal governance structures were in the church, the more likely it was that beneficial by-products and side effects would be produced, just as they are in worker cooperatives today. Some of these spin-offs are noted by Elliott: "openness to all—regardless of ethnicity, class or gender—and by an intimacy, spirit of solidarity, generosity and commitment to God, Jesus Christ and one another as typical of an ancient family."<sup>43</sup> It is feasible to argue that egalitarian governance encourages these qualities, and that the qualities are themselves components of egalitarianism in general. Since membership of the church was open to all, this is a sign of all-encompassment, an illustration of equality of opportunity, and of all-inclusiveness. In the same way, the greater the degree of egalitarian governance and the lesser of hierarchical division within an organization, the greater the opportunity for intimacy between members, the greater the chance of forming a spirit of solidarity among them. This consideration applies as much to the present day as to first-century Palestine. This behavior was not typical of the ancient family, for it leaves out of the equation the power of the patriarch. No such power base is reported in how Jesus wanted his followers organized.

The seven reversal-of-status texts listed above can more accurately be described as Jesus aiming to eliminate status differentials between his followers, and to promote governance egalitarianism. Status differentials and disparities in how people are to be regarded

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<sup>42</sup> John H. Elliott, "Jesus Was Not an Egalitarian: A Critique of an Anachronistic and Idealist Theory," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32.2 (May 2002): 86.

<sup>43</sup> Elliott, "The Jesus Movement," 195.



in relation to each other—their standing, position, prestige, or rank on a scale or grade existing within the movement—are rejected by Jesus. According to the texts, he did not want such things to exist, but he went further than this. The issue was how people in the movement were to treat each other, and what sort of lines of command and control were desirable to encourage this treatment, for which governance egalitarianism was Jesus' preferred choice.

### *The Relevance of Social and Economic Disparity*

Another objection to the assertion that Jesus' movement practiced governance egalitarianism is that its members were of different economic and social standing from each other. This contention need not be relevant, as witnessed by contemporary organizations utilizing governance egalitarianism. People of different economic/social standing join and participate equally in the running of all manner of voluntary organizations. Modern worker cooperatives are one such example. Members join a cooperative by contributing equal amounts to a collective fund. That some members joining the coop are wealthier than others is immaterial to how the coop functions. Members exist within the coop without distinction of status, rank, or prestige, or in how decision-making functions.

That some of Jesus' followers were wealthier than others or came into the movement with a higher social standing does not contradict Jesus' objective to minimize the exercise of power and domination within the movement. The greater wealth of some was of value to the movement, since their financial support made it possible for Jesus' intentions to be realized more readily. The wealthy women supporting Jesus and the disciples is one such example. Jesus recognized these social disparities but they had no relevance to the running of the organization, if it can be called that. In Luke 6:40 (// Matthew 10:24–25 and John 13:16, 15:20), “a disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher.” By joining the new community, the disciples would become “fully qualified”; they would be “like the teacher.” In becoming like the teacher, any presumption of social disparity in, say, prestige or standing between disciples and teacher dissipates.

Jesus' presumptions in his teachings about the social conditions he confronted do not assume he accepted their desirability or eternal continuation of their existence; they merely describe their existing state. Jesus is drawing inferences from describing the society of his

time. He used illustrations of disparity with which his listeners would be familiar, but Jesus draws inferences entirely different from those in his descriptions of existing life. They do not prescribe how life in the new community was to be structured (see Mark 13:34–37; Luke 12:42–48, 16:1–8; 19:11–27). These texts contain no presumption that Jesus approved of the situations he described, or that this is how he wanted his followers organized. Thus Mark 13:34–37 has the master going on a journey and leaving the slaves to look after the property. While the story recognizes that male household owners control slaves, Jesus' message is quite different from focusing on the details of the story. It concerns the necessity for everybody to remain vigilant until the time Jesus returns.

To raise an objection against Jesus' governance egalitarianism because "presumptions of social and economic disparity"<sup>44</sup> underlie Jesus' teachings misses the point of what Jesus was expounding. This can be shown by analogy. Jesus likens God to a "thief" (Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39). The dishonest manager is commended for his shrewdness (Luke 16:8), the master is hated by his citizens (Luke 19:14), who are ultimately slaughtered (Luke 19:27). It would be mistaken to conclude from Jesus using these descriptions in his teaching that he approved of theft, dishonesty, hate, slaughter, torture (Matt. 18:34), or self-mutilation (Matt. 5:29, 18:8–9). Because Jesus did not condemn these phenomena, it cannot be concluded that he implicitly approved of them. The moral of Jesus' teaching was directed to other ends.

Jesus' intended practice of governance egalitarianism within the church did not require "an elimination of economic disparities" among church members.<sup>45</sup> Eliminating these differentials within the church would have been impossible since members still had to earn their livings in their roles in a highly stratified secular world. Jesus' governance egalitarianism meant that all who became believers and joined a house church would have equal say in running the church. Authority in the church—meaning the structure of decision-making responsibility—was to be shared evenly among all its members. "Economic disparities" would remain among church members; perhaps vestiges of social rankings likewise persisted. Members would perform different functions in the church, but difference in function was not meant to involve different gradings of prestige or status. A hierarchy

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<sup>44</sup> Elliott, "Jesus Was Not an Egalitarian," 84.

<sup>45</sup> Elliott, "The Jesus Movement," 193.

of authority was not planned to exist within the church. Decisions were not to be made by those up the hierarchical scale and imposed on those of lower status, except insofar as Jesus was the source of the movement and its fountainhead. Decision-making was to be all-encompassing, and while Jesus sought to suppress social rankings, he did not anticipate that disparities among members would cease to exist.

### *The Natural Family and Governance Egalitarianism*

Another objection to the claim that governance egalitarianism operated within the Jesus movement is that this mode of social organization had no social referents for its existence in first-century Palestine. The most typical form of social organization known was the natural family, and this functioned on a patriarchal basis. As Elliott puts it, the existing family had a “hierarchical, male dominated kinship structure.”<sup>46</sup> A leap is then made that the Jesus movement adopted this patriarchal mode of organization because it was the only model available. If this contention were valid, the natural family stood in the way of governance egalitarianism. It would not provide support for the claim that “the surrogate family created by Jesus and continued by his followers was always patriarchal in structure.”<sup>47</sup>

Because Jesus (allegedly) knew only the model of the family that existed does not mean that he based the organization of his new community on every aspect of the existing family’s structure. Although Jesus does not mention patriarchy or hierarchy, there is no evidence that his new community bore characteristics of these states. The only line of authority and hierarchy within the movement was from Jesus to the disciples. Jesus’ new family thereby embodied the patriarchy of God. That Jesus’ teaching involved qualities that the family of his time embodied, such as the sanctity of marriage, cannot be taken as argument for Jesus upholding patriarchy. On the contrary, Jesus sought to encourage a state in his movement in which people related to each other without hierarchy, domination, or authority, presenting themselves as similar in rank and status. This mode of interrelationship and of that within the natural family embodied divergent qualities. In

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<sup>46</sup> Elliott, “Jesus Was Not an Egalitarian,” 84.

<sup>47</sup> Elliott, “The Jesus Movement,” 197.

the new family, God/Jesus was the patriarch; in the natural family, the male parent was the patriarch.

Governance egalitarianism need not be the opposite of patriarchy,<sup>48</sup> but it is incompatible with it. If a patriarch had power and authority in an organization, governance egalitarianism could not operate. The decision-making relations required by governance egalitarianism could not function simultaneously with patriarchy. However, there is no need to adopt an anti-natural-family viewpoint to pit against the organization of Jesus' movement, as though Jesus repudiated the patriarchal natural family as a precondition for governance egalitarianism within his movement. No evidence emerges in the texts examined above that a patriarchal structure was wanted by Jesus to characterize this surrogate family or the natural family, even though the natural family was characterized by patriarchy. Suppose during Jesus' lifetime, "household heads . . . served as leaders [of the house churches] and were rendered respect and gratitude from the rank and file."<sup>49</sup> This need not contradict governance egalitarianism as it has been defined here. "Respect" and "gratitude" are not components of the definition of status. The existence of leaders is consistent with governance egalitarianism, as their organizational example today shows.

It is going too far to claim with Elliott that "Jesus established a surrogate family to replace the biological family." More nuanced is to suggest that Jesus wanted the biological family to co-exist with the surrogate family of the new community to which his followers would evince priority in loyalty. As noted, there is no textual evidence that this surrogate family had a patriarchal or hierarchical rather than an egalitarian structure. This does not mean that all members of the church performed the same role. Diversity of membership and role are manifested clearly in the Jesus and post-Jesus church. Here, "brothers and sisters are assigned roles and statuses appropriate to their capacities and gifts as apostles, prophets, teachers, host and the like." These roles could change within the church. For example, Elliott points out that it was acceptable in the churches for "reassignment of roles e.g. women and youth as leaders on the basis of quality

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<sup>48</sup> S. Scott Bartchy, "Undermining Ancient Patriarchy: The Apostle Paul's Vision of a Society of Siblings," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 29 (May 1999): 77.

<sup>49</sup> Elliott, "The Jesus Movement," 203.

of service and seniority as believers.”<sup>50</sup> None of this means that a hierarchy of control within the church was established on these or any other bases. Diversification of role did not imply that the church was to be run in a governance manner embodying top-down authority.

Another way of looking at all this is to see Jesus as wanting to restructure the natural family. This point is made by Santiago Oporto that “the coming Kingdom of God does not seek to abolish the family as such, but rather to transform the relationships which exist within it.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, “Jesus issues no condemnation of the family as such,” but “only declares the biological family to be of secondary significance” in view of God’s forthcoming reign.<sup>52</sup> Priority of loyalty to Jesus over family was the issue. However, Elliott recognizes that the central role of the family in God’s design was preserved. Thus, Jesus’ band of itinerant followers depended on stable families for support. There is no evidence that the natural versus surrogate family possessed greater status, rank, or position than the other. On the other hand, economic disparity existed between them so the two groups were not equal in this sense. This is not the issue, however, but rather whether relationships within the community Jesus was forming could be described as characterized by governance egalitarian.

### *Conclusion*

It does not seem that Jesus or any subset of his followers in his own time sought rights to power, domination, or authority within his movement; instead, Jesus argued in the opposite direction. This is so even though Jesus had charismatic presence, so that his followers sought to obey his teachings voluntarily. Jesus was authoritative but not authoritarian, in the sense that he did not seek to exercise coercive power or authority over his followers. Jesus operated with a different conception of power, reflecting his capacity to bring about intended results. Given Jesus as the leader, it was not the case that some members exercised authority and others did not. Part of the reason for the loose, ad hoc, and egalitarian nature of the movement he formed was that Jesus did not require all his followers to become members of house churches. Jesus still favored non-hierarchical modes of

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<sup>50</sup> Elliott, “The Jesus Movement,” 191, 192, 194.

<sup>51</sup> Santiago Guijarro Oporto, “Kingdom and Family in Conflict: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus,” in *Social Scientific Models for Interpreting the Bible*, ed. John J. Pilch (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 237.

<sup>52</sup> Elliott, “Jesus Was Not an Egalitarian,” 78.

decision-making among the looser following of which they were part, as far as it was within their power. This notion does not equate to family patriarchy, particularly in households where the patriarch had become a believer.

Nor is it necessary to hold that Jesus' movement would be confined to house churches. It is overstating the importance of these churches to believe that they "formed the basis, locus, and focus of the Jesus movement from its inception."<sup>53</sup> Time and again, Jesus addressed his instruction to "the crowds" as well as the disciples. Whoever behaved as Jesus wanted would be received into his kingdom. He did not limit this acceptance only to those who became members of churches. Jesus expected people to respond positively to his teaching. By practicing his precepts in the ordinary course of their lives, including governance egalitarianism in whatever context they found themselves, they were part of the body of Christ. As Jesus put it, "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matt. 12:49–50 // Mark 3:35 and Luke 8:21). In this sense, all people could become part of the household of Christ, since entry was freely available. "Non-discriminatory inclusion," as Elliott sees it practiced by the Jesus movement, amounts to equality of opportunity of entry.<sup>54</sup>

If Jesus' teachings were oriented to reducing inequality in certain areas (such as in the governance he laid down for his movement, and in the distribution of wealth between rich and poor), this makes him an egalitarian in terms of the modern usage of the word. To make this claim, no inference is required that Jesus sought absolute equality in all its dimensions within his movement. All that need be claimed is that existing disparities in selected areas were mitigated, such as governance. Children did not become "leaders in the movement" (an absurd proposal). Slaves were not liberated, and women were "not put on a social parity with men."<sup>55</sup> It is not known to what extent differences between rich and poor persisted in the movement, despite Elliott's assertion of their maintenance. A reasonable conclusion from investigating the texts cited in this paper is that Jesus was instigating an egalitarian governance program within his movement. His was a vision for how his movement should function, even if it was not one subsequently practiced after his death.

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<sup>53</sup> Elliott, "The Jesus Movement," 204.

<sup>54</sup> Elliott, "The Jesus Movement," 181.

<sup>55</sup> Elliott, "Jesus Was Not an Egalitarian," 85.

