Greatness through Service: Mark 10:35–45 and the Accountability of Christian Power

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ABSTRACT

Christian leadership frequently affirms servanthood while leaving the exercise of authority insufficiently accountable. This article examines how Mark 10:35–45 can inform a theological framework for distinguishing service from domination. Drawing on a bounded narrative review of twenty-five selected works and a focused theological reading of the passage, it explores the relationship between greatness, service, and power. The synthesis interprets greatness as an evaluative criterion, service as the governing practice of leadership, and power as the domain requiring accountability. It distinguishes Jesus' redemptive self-giving from human leadership responsibilities and examines tensions between sacrifice and sustainability, divine calling and communal scrutiny, and participation and decisive authority. The proposed framework evaluates leadership through its capacity to develop others, protect vulnerable people, and provide credible opportunities to question decisions and correct harmful practices. Its contribution lies in connecting professed servanthood with institutional correctability, thereby treating personal formation and structural safeguards as complementary responsibilities. The article concludes that Christian power becomes ethically credible when those affected by its exercise can participate meaningfully in its evaluation. The framework offers normative guidance for churches and faith-based institutions, while its practical effectiveness remains open to empirical investigation.

Keywords: Mark 10:35–45; Christian leadership; servant leadership; accountability; ecclesial power

INTRODUCTION

The request of James and John to occupy places of honour in Jesus' glory exposes a problem that remains familiar in Christian communities: a commitment to religious mission can coexist with the desire for privileged access to authority. Mark 10:35–45 addresses that problem through Jesus' teaching about suffering, greatness, service, and the purpose of his own mission. The passage challenges leadership that seeks elevation through the subordination of others. It also raises a practical theological question. If leaders are called to serve, how can a community distinguish accountable service from the use of servanthood language to protect unaccountable power?

Christian institutions require decisions, the allocation of resources, and the coordination of common work. A theological critique of domination therefore needs to explain how legitimate authority can function. Describing leaders as humble does not settle who controls information, whose concerns are heard, or what happens when a decision causes harm. The ethical meaning of service becomes clearer when it is connected to these arrangements. A leader's stated willingness to serve must be considered alongside the conditions under which others can assess, challenge, and redirect that service.

The selected literature offers several resources for this task. Wilkes (1998) links leadership to following Jesus and sharing responsibility. Greenleaf (1977) connects legitimate power with a prior commitment to serve. Manala (2010) brings leadership, management, and servanthood into a shared pastoral ministry. Plantak (2017), Randall (2012), and Wollf (2014) direct attention to the ethical exercise of power and its

organisational setting. Together, these perspectives suggest that leadership requires both the formation of persons and the scrutiny of institutions.

The article advances a constructive synthesis rather than claiming to discover servanthood as a new Christian principle. Its contribution is to connect three dimensions that are often discussed separately: greatness as a criterion for evaluating leadership, service as the practice that governs its exercise, and power as the domain of accountability. The framework is intended to make a familiar theological affirmation more discriminating. It asks whether service develops others' agency and whether authority remains open to correction. These questions allow the language of servanthood to be evaluated where leaders possess formal office, spiritual credibility, financial influence, or control over institutional knowledge.

Problem Statement and Purpose

The problem addressed here is the gap between professed servanthood and accountable authority. A community may celebrate a leader's humility while retaining arrangements that make criticism costly or ineffective. In contrast, it may establish oversight procedures without cultivating the moral commitments needed to use them honestly. Neither personal benevolence nor formal procedure, considered alone, gives a sufficient account of Christian leadership.

The guiding research question is: How can a theological reading of Mark 10:35–45, brought into conversation with selected leadership literature, inform criteria for distinguishing service from domination? The article's purpose is to clarify the relationship between servanthood and accountability, examine tensions within the selected literature, and propose questions through which churches and faith-based institutions can evaluate the exercise of power. It does not test the effectiveness of a leadership intervention or claim that one form of church government follows directly from the passage.

METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

This study adopts a bounded narrative review and constructive theological approach. Its starting corpus consists of the twenty-four works assembled in the antecedent manuscript. All are retained. The corpus includes books, journal contributions, a doctoral dissertation, and a ministry project, with publication dates ranging from 1977 to 2021. Mukuka (2025) is added because his discussion of moral leadership explicitly connects Christian mission with social justice. The resulting corpus contains twenty-five works. It is an inherited, purposive collection rather than the outcome of an exhaustive database search.

The three categories of greatness, service, and power are retained as organising concepts from the original manuscript. They are not presented as themes discovered through independent inductive coding. The synthesis compares the arguments represented in the corpus under those categories, identifies points of tension, and develops normative implications. Mark 10:35–45 provides the principal biblical frame. Attention to its narrative sequence helps evaluate whether applications preserve the relationship between discipleship, suffering, and Jesus' distinctive mission.

The analysis distinguishes three levels of claim. Interpretive claims concern the meaning of the biblical passage. Theological claims concern the standards by which Christian leadership should be judged. Practical proposals translate those standards into possible arrangements for participation and review. Assertions about organisational outcomes require empirical evidence and are therefore stated cautiously. Recommendations concerning complaints, decision review, and the protection of vulnerable members are constructive extensions of the synthesis, not procedures explicitly prescribed in Mark.

The sources are not treated as interchangeable evidence. Ministry-oriented books contribute theological and formative perspectives; journal discussions provide conceptual arguments and, where applicable, accounts of organisational practice; dissertations and projects offer more specialised inquiries. Agreement among these works can support a theological synthesis without establishing an empirical effect. Likewise, a political leadership example cannot be transferred directly into church governance without attention to differences in institutional purpose and authority.

This scope permits an explicit account of the selected arguments, but it does not establish a consensus across Christian leadership scholarship. References to convergence below mean convergence within this corpus. No statistical aggregation, original fieldwork, or empirical validation of the proposed framework is claimed.

Mark 10 and the Reorientation of Greatness

Honour within the Journey Toward Suffering

The placement of the disciples' request matters. Jesus has just described the suffering and death awaiting him in Jerusalem (Mark 10:32–34), while James and John ask for positions in his glory (10:35–37). Their request reveals a separation between the honour they seek and the costly mission Jesus has announced. The episode should therefore be read as a challenge to the disciples' understanding of participation in that mission, rather than as a detachable lesson in administrative humility.

Jesus' response introduces the cup and baptism as images of the ordeal in which the brothers will participate (10:38–39). He then distinguishes that participation from the allocation of the requested places (10:40). Suffering does not function as a payment that secures privileged office. The narrative interrupts the assumption that closeness to Jesus gives disciples a claim to advancement. Christian applications should accordingly avoid suggesting that sacrifice entitles a minister to recognition, immunity from scrutiny, or permanent institutional control.

The indignation of the other ten disciples broadens the problem beyond the two brothers (10:41). The passage depicts a communal conflict over precedence. Jesus gathers the group and contrasts familiar patterns of rule with the relationships expected among them (10:42–44). The question concerns the form of their shared life as well as individual motives. Leadership formation that addresses ambition while leaving status competition institutionally rewarded would attend to only part of the episode's challenge.

Service and the Refusal of Domination

The movement from greatness to service and from being first to becoming slave of all intensifies the challenge to privileged standing (10:43–44). The formulation places the leader under obligations to others. It does not provide an organisational chart or dissolve all differentiated responsibility. Its normative force concerns the purpose and manner of exercising influence: authority cannot be justified merely by the officeholder's claim to superior status.

The language of slavery requires ethical care in contemporary application. It should not be used to legitimise coerced submission, unlimited availability, or the silencing of people who experience abuse. The demand is directed toward those seeking greatness. A leader who invokes another person's duty to serve in order to avoid accountability reverses the direction of Jesus' challenge. Service must be considered in relation to the agency and protection of those subjected to power, not only through the intentions of those exercising it.

Thompson (2015) relates the passage to the tensions between ambition and sacrifice, and between power and service. This article builds on that connection by asking what institutional conditions allow those tensions to be examined. The point of extension is accountability: followers require more than reassurance that leaders intend to prioritise the group's good. They need credible opportunities to evaluate decisions and raise concerns when those intentions do not match their experience.

Jesus' Self-Giving and the Limits of Imitation

Verse 45 grounds the teaching in the mission of the Son of Man, whose service culminates in giving his life as a ransom for many. The ransom language prevents the passage from being reduced to a strategy for gaining influence through benevolence. Jesus' self-giving carries a redemptive significance that cannot simply be transferred to a pastor, administrator, or institutional founder. Human leaders may imitate the orientation of his service without claiming an equivalent saving role.

Crowther (2008) connects Jesus' teaching with his enacted service, while Patterson (2016) locates Christ's descent into service within a wider biblical account of leadership. These perspectives support attention to the relationship between teaching and embodiment. The present synthesis adds an important boundary: Christian leaders serve as fallible participants in Christ's mission. Their sacrifice does not place them beyond review. An account of leadership that makes a human minister indispensable risks confusing faithful participation with the unique role attributed to Jesus.

The passage thus supports a theological critique of domination and a pattern of self-giving responsibility. Specific governance arrangements must be developed through further ethical reasoning. Independent review, transparent decisions, and protection against retaliation are proposed here as contemporary ways of making that orientation credible, rather than as direct institutional instructions contained in the text.

Critical Synthesis of the Selected Literature

Greatness as a criterion of evaluation

Wilkes (1998) emphasises humility, following Christ, and the sharing of responsibility and authority. Greenleaf (1977) begins with the desire to serve and links it to legitimate power. Their convergence is useful, although their theological starting points differ. Christian leadership cannot be defined solely by importing an organisational model that happens to value service. It must also explain how its commitments arise from discipleship and how these commitments constrain the pursuit of effectiveness.

Hanna's (2006) relational account helps address this issue. If leadership is a process among persons, greatness should be evaluated through the relationships that authority sustains. Mathew (2012) sharpens the contrast between seeking privileged positions and undertaking service. Read together, these works suggest that the relevant question is not how a leader acquires a reputation for humility but how leadership affects other people's participation and dignity. This interpretation preserves ambition for worthwhile common work while questioning ambition organised around personal precedence.

Činčala (2018) also resists equating service with weakness. The ability to guide, build relationships, and strengthen institutional mission remains important. Nevertheless, constructive influence should not be defined entirely by visible growth or popularity. A leader may act responsibly by challenging a harmful practice even when the decision reduces immediate support. The criterion of greatness must therefore include faithfulness and justice alongside capacity to accomplish common purposes.

The tension in this group concerns whether greatness remains something the leader should seek. Treating it as a personal goal can preserve the status competition the passage challenges. The formulation proposed here treats greatness primarily as an evaluative criterion. Communities assess leadership through the service it renders and the agency it enables. Leaders can pursue the good of their vocation without making their own greatness the object of institutional life.

Service as Formation and Shared Responsibility

Jørgensen (2012) understands leadership as equipping people for service in church and society. Nouwen (1989) locates leadership in dependence on Christ and warns against the pursuit of popularity and influence. These emphases complement one another: the leader needs spiritual formation, while the community needs opportunities to exercise responsibility. Dependence on God does not justify producing institutional dependence on the leader.

Blanchard and Hodges (2003) describe servanthood through heart, head, hands, and habits. Rodriguez (2015) approaches its intentional development through theological education. Together they suggest that service involves both dispositions and learnable practices. This resolves an unnecessary opposition between character and competency. A leader may have sincere motives yet lack the ability to delegate, communicate, or respond to conflict. Training can develop those abilities without claiming to manufacture moral integrity.

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Newton (2016) distinguishes biblical servanthood from popular leadership models by giving priority to service to God. That priority is theologically significant, but it creates an accountability question when leaders appeal to divine calling to override the concerns of those affected. Sanou's (2013) balancing of truth, allegiance, and power provides a helpful counterweight. A claim to serve God cannot authenticate itself. It requires examination through the community's theological and ethical commitments, including its responsibility to recognise harm.

Manala (2010) holds pastoral leadership, management, and servanthood together within shared and equipping ministry. This avoids portraying administration as inherently opposed to service. Budgets, appointments, and procedures can serve people when they are competently organised and open to review. Equipping also requires resources and coordination. The relevant contrast is between management that supports shared ministry and management that makes participants dependent on unchecked authority.

Činčala and Chase (2018) connect servant leadership with church health and growth. Singfiel (2018) complicates that connection by considering why followers may perceive a servant leader as laissez-faire. These sources require the synthesis to acknowledge that benevolent intentions do not settle the quality of leadership. Clarity, timely decisions, and appropriate responsibility matter. At the same time, perceived effectiveness is not a sufficient ethical test: followers may approve leadership that excludes less powerful members. Service should be evaluated through competence, fairness, and opportunities for those members to speak.

Another tension concerns sacrifice. The call to service can encourage generous ministry, but it can also be used to demand unsustainable labour from staff and volunteers. The framework therefore treats reasonable boundaries as compatible with responsible service. Sharing work, providing rest, and recognising limits can protect the community's capacity for continued ministry. This is a constructive ethical implication of shared responsibility, not a measured outcome established by the present review.

Power and the Institutional Conditions of Accountability

Plantak (2017) examines abuses of power in Christian leadership through an Adventist historical case. Randall (2012) considers how leadership shapes an organisation's ethical climate. These contributions move the discussion beyond individual decisions. An institution may discourage criticism through its expectations and informal rewards even where its written policies permit questions. Evaluating power therefore includes asking what people expect will happen if they challenge a respected leader.

Wollf (2014) connects power, knowledge, and participation in organisational change. Participation should consequently be assessed through the information available to members and their ability to influence decisions, rather than through attendance at meetings alone. Patterson (2013) directs attention to ambition and spiritual leadership. Motives remain important, but institutional safeguards cannot depend on outsiders knowing the leader's inner life. They must make the exercise of authority reviewable even when intentions are contested.

Dias (2012) locates the power of mission in the name of Jesus. This offers a theological basis for resisting personal indispensability. The leader's contribution matters without becoming the source of the community's mission. Kgatle (2018), writing about political leadership in South Africa, gives the corpus a wider setting for considering corruption and accountability. Political and ecclesial authority differ, so his argument supports comparison rather than automatic institutional transfer. It nonetheless raises a relevant question about how professions of public service are constrained by actual arrangements for scrutiny.

Zgambo (2021) examines church government from a Reformed perspective and criticises historical movements toward hierarchical control. His denominational standpoint should remain explicit. The present argument does not infer that every hierarchy is necessarily abusive or that one polity guarantees service. Any structure should be evaluated through its distribution of responsibility and its capacity to hear concerns, correct mistakes, and restrain domination. Informal authority can be concentrated even in a community that rejects formal hierarchy.

Mukuka (2025) adds a missiological perspective by connecting moral leadership with prophetic responsibility, cultural literacy, and action against structural injustice. His discussion of marginalised voices and institutional reform extends the assessment of service beyond benevolent intentions. It directs attention to who is excluded from the benefits and deliberations of Christian institutions. Read alongside Mark 10:35–45, this perspective supports evaluating power through its treatment of those least able to secure recognition. Mukuka's argument is used here as a theological and contextual contribution, not as empirical validation of the proposed framework.

The corpus thus supports a distinction between possessing power and using power dominatively. Formal authority can be exercised responsibly, while apparently modest or informal leadership can remain coercive. The practical issue is whether those affected can understand decisions, question them safely, and obtain a fair response. Accountability must apply to spiritual influence and access to resources as well as official office.

DISCUSSION AND CONSTRUCTIVE FINDINGS

A Framework For Evaluating Christian Power

The synthesis yields a proposed evaluative framework with three connected dimensions. Greatness names the criterion by which leadership is judged: its faithfulness in serving the common good and recognising the dignity of others. Service names the governing practice through which authority is exercised: equipping, responsible decision-making, and attention to those affected. Power names the domain in which these commitments require accountability, because leaders can influence resources, knowledge, participation, and the interpretation of religious obligation.

These dimensions should be considered together. A leader may perform generous personal acts while retaining exclusive control of important decisions. An institution may provide consultation while ensuring that dissent cannot change the outcome. A community may celebrate a minister's sacrifice while tolerating the exhaustion of less visible workers. In each case, the framework asks whether the observable exercise of power supports the service that is professed.

The framework extends the selected literature by making correctability a central question. Accountability includes the obligation to explain and justify decisions, the possibility of independent evaluation, and a proportionate response when wrongdoing or serious error is established. Its purpose is more substantial than demonstrating that a policy exists. People must have a usable route to raise concerns, and the process must be capable of producing correction. This is the article's constructive proposal rather than an assertion that the corpus establishes one universal governance design.

Four diagnostic questions follow. Whose interests does the decision serve? Does it strengthen others' capacity to participate? Can affected people question it without retaliation? What credible process can revise the decision or address harm? The questions apply to both formal and informal power. Their answers should be supported by institutional practice rather than by a leader's self-description.

Decision-Making and Meaningful Participation

Accountable service does not require every decision to be made by everyone. Responsibilities differ, and leaders sometimes need to act under time constraints. Participation becomes meaningful when its purpose and limits are clear. People should know what is open to consultation, who has decision authority, and how reasons will be communicated. A leader who cannot adopt a recommendation should still explain why and remain answerable for the consequences.

Similarly, decisive leadership can serve the community when it challenges misconduct or protects people who lack influence. The framework does not equate disagreement with abuse or popularity with legitimacy. It evaluates the exercise of authority through purpose, procedure, and treatment of those affected. Where

immediate action is necessary, subsequent review can preserve accountability. Confidentiality may sometimes restrict disclosure, but it should not eliminate scrutiny by suitably independent people.

The protection of dissent is particularly important where religious credibility is concentrated in one person. Questioning a decision must not automatically be represented as disloyalty to God or opposition to mission. Communities need ways to distinguish responsible criticism from damaging conduct through fair procedures. Theological language should support that discernment rather than pre-empt it by identifying a leader's judgement with divine authority.

Formation and Safeguards as Complementary Responsibilities

The synthesis rejects reliance on either personal virtue or procedure alone. Formation can help leaders recognise ambition, accept limits, and receive criticism. Institutional safeguards make those commitments visible and provide protection when formation fails. For example, transparent financial reporting can express stewardship, shared appointment processes can reduce patronage, and a complaints procedure independent of the person complained about can support fair review. These are recommended applications requiring adaptation to institutional context.

The mutual dependence also works in the other direction. Procedures can become tools of domination when powerful people control their interpretation or use them selectively. An accountability system needs proportionate standards, protection for complainants, and fairness toward those accused. Responsible review should examine evidence and permit a response. A service-oriented institution protects people from both unchecked authority and arbitrary sanction.

The framework therefore gives leaders and communities distinct responsibilities. Leaders should disclose relevant interests, explain decisions, develop others, and accept scrutiny. Communities should provide credible oversight and avoid rewarding indispensability. Those conducting review should be sufficiently independent to assess concerns honestly. These obligations translate the theological norm of service into relationships that can be examined in practice.

Mission and the Interests of Vulnerable People

Service can be assessed too narrowly when the institution's survival or growth is treated as the overriding good. A church may expand while disregarding staff welfare, excluding particular groups, or suppressing complaints. The framework treats institutional achievement as subject to ethical evaluation. Mission does not excuse the means by which success is pursued.

In churches and faith-based universities, this implies attention to those whose dependence makes objection costly. Students, junior employees, volunteers, and members with limited resources may experience authority differently from senior officeholders. Their circumstances should inform the design of consultation and review. The institution should ask whether its procedures can actually be used by people with little status, not merely whether such procedures are formally available.

Mukuka's (2025) integration of moral leadership and social justice reinforces this outward orientation. The present article develops that connection into a question of internal consistency: an institution's public concern for justice should be accompanied by scrutiny of the power exercised within its own community. Public witness gains ethical credibility when institutional relationships are open to correction.

LIMITATIONS

The study uses an inherited and purposive corpus. It cannot establish the prevalence of particular positions across Christian leadership research or demonstrate that the selected sources represent the full range of theological traditions. Several works come from Adventist-associated publications, while ministry books and conceptual discussions contribute differently from empirical research. The resulting convergence may

partly reflect the corpus's composition. A broader review could reveal stronger disagreements or alternative accounts of authority.

The focused reading of Mark 10:35–45 is not an exhaustive historical or linguistic exegesis. Questions concerning ransom, social status, slavery, and the wider reception of the passage merit further specialist investigation. The institutional recommendations also require more than textual interpretation: they depend on ethical judgement and contextual knowledge. The article consequently distinguishes the passage's critique of domination from the particular governance practices proposed in response.

No original interviews, institutional observations, or quantitative analyses were conducted. The framework's diagnostic value and organisational effects remain untested. It does not establish that participation always improves outcomes, that formal oversight always prevents abuse, or that servant leadership necessarily increases church growth. Future research should examine how formal and informal power interact and whether ostensibly accessible review mechanisms protect people in practice.

Theological Implications

The theological implication is that leadership remains accountable because human authority is exercised under, rather than in place of, Christ's lordship. A claim to calling cannot give a leader the redemptive status associated with the Son of Man in Mark 10:45. Christian leaders participate in a mission they do not own. This provides grounds for affirming responsibility while rejecting personal immunity from criticism.

Servanthood also has a corporate dimension. The disciples' conflict concerns their relationships with one another, and Jesus addresses the group. A community that honours service should therefore examine how it distributes recognition, burdens, and access to decisions. Spiritual formation becomes more credible when communal arrangements support it. Accountability can then be understood as part of faithful discipleship rather than an external intrusion into religious life.

Finally, the relationship between service and justice constrains institutional self-preservation. Protecting a respected ministry or organisational reputation cannot justify ignoring harm. The community's theological commitments require attention to those whose accounts are easiest to dismiss. Such attention does not eliminate the need for evidence or fair review; it requires that those processes be available to the people who need them.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Churches and faith-based institutions should connect leadership formation with assessment of actual authority. Training should address delegation, conflict, the reception of criticism, and the distinction between spiritual calling and personal entitlement. Selection and appraisal processes should examine how leaders develop others and respond when their decisions are questioned. These practices should be adapted to the institution's mission and governance arrangements.

Institutions should also identify where power is concentrated, including control of information, finances, appointments, and spiritual interpretation. Review arrangements should clarify authority, provide channels outside the immediate supervisory relationship, and establish fair processes for evaluating concerns. Policies should protect against retaliation while preserving confidentiality and procedural fairness. Consultation should communicate its scope and explain how participants' contributions informed the decision.

Future empirical research could compare leaders' accounts of service with the experiences of those affected by their decisions. Qualitative studies could examine how dissent is received and how claims of divine calling operate during disputes. Comparative institutional studies could assess whether accessible review mechanisms produce correction and whether outcomes differ for marginalised members. Such research would test the framework's usefulness without treating its theological commitments as already validated causal findings.

CONCLUSION

Mark 10:35–45 challenges the pursuit of honour through domination and grounds service in the distinctive mission of Jesus. Read with the selected literature, it supports evaluating Christian leadership through the relationships and responsibilities that power creates. Greatness becomes a criterion of faithful service, while service governs the exercise of authority. Accountability gives communities a way to examine whether these commitments hold in practice.

The article's contribution is the connection between servanthood and correctability. Leaders cannot substantiate service solely through their intentions, reputation, or sacrifice. Their authority should develop others' capacity, attend to vulnerable people, and remain answerable through credible review. Personal formation and institutional safeguards support this responsibility together. Christian power serves faithfully when those affected can participate in its evaluation and obtain correction when it causes harm.

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