

In Defense of the Apostles’ “Power Dispute”

You have long since learned that “*A dispute also arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest*” (Luke 22:24). You have wondered at their insensitivity and selfishness in being involved in a grab for power at such a crucial time.

Maybe it is my aging mind that is playing tricks on me, but the optical illusion that I have seen since my teenage years shifted suddenly so that I see the picture from a surprisingly different viewpoint. Let me share it with you. If you think it is a delusion instead of a true perspective, I will still try to love you even though I might not like you as well as when you agree with me.

During his ministry, Jesus had much to say about his kingdom. He had these shocking words to share with his little band of apostles. Rather early in his time with the apostles, he assured them, “*Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom*” (Luke 12:32). Then, on the night of his betrayal, he added, “*You are those who have continued with me in my trials; as my Father appointed a kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel*” (Luke 22:28f).

Jesus was laying some awesome news on the twelve apostles who were without skill or experience in executive or administrative leadership. WOW!! No wonder that they would begin disputing about who would be greatest – the leader among them..

In the setting of his Transfiguration, Jesus told the disciples of the imminence of the kingdom and that he would be delivered up, killed, and raised the third day. The disciples were greatly distressed (Matt. 16:28; 17:22-24). Then the disciples inquired of Jesus as to who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (18:1). Jesus told them the must become as little children, for whoever humbles himself like a child is the greatest.

As Mark relates the account in Mark 9, he tells of Jesus pointing to the child as an example also, but adding “*If any one would be first, he must be last of all and the servant of all*” (v. 35).

In Luke’s account, he states that an argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. Then he quotes Jesus as saying, “*Who is least among you all is the one who is great*” (Luke 9:46-48).

No doubt, the disciples pondered Jesus’ statements, yet he had not clarified specifically the questions in their minds. Who are these people you have in mind? Give us some names!

At another time the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee got into the act. Their Mom would help supply some candidates by name. She asked Jesus to let her sons have key and honored places in his kingdom. That became an embarrassment all the way around. Her request was not granted, and the other disciples became indignant at the impropriety of her request and the sons going along with her on it.

Then Jesus gave them another lesson about greatness, saying, “*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Matt. 20:20-28). Still, Jesus did not answer specifically their burning question.

Time passes. It is the night of his betrayal. The cross will be tomorrow. They are gathered for the Last Supper, as Luke records in Chapter 22. Jesus was preparing them for his leaving. During the Passover meal it became clear that the time had come for Jesus to be delivered up and crucified. The anxiety of the disciples evidently continued to intensify. So there was another private discussion among the apostles about which of them was to be regarded as greatest.

In this awesome moment in history, were the apostles locked in a selfish power struggle? Had Jesus not already touched on this issue sufficiently? In view of the indignation expressed when James and John let their mother lead them into status-seeking, could they all now be caught up in a power dispute? Had selfishness conquered them all? Let's think better thoughts of them.

In this setting, Jesus told them, *"You are those who have continued with me in my trials; as my Father appointed a kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."* You mean us? Lord, you can't mean that! We are just fishermen! We know nothing of administering a kingdom and of judging Israel! The thought of it brought overpowering fear!

From this viewpoint, let us imagine their dispute/argument sessions about who would be great. They asked, *"If Jesus is going to put a kingdom in our charge, who among us is great enough to be ruler?"* Philip speaks up, *"I think Matthew would do best for he his older and has held a responsible government job."* Andrew argues, *"Maybe we should look outside our circle. Since James is the brother of our Lord and a son of David, it seems that he is the best qualified."* Bartholemew puts in his word, *"Simon Peter has the most courage and leadership qualities which a great man must have. He fits best."* James, the son of Alphaeus, proposes, *"We all know that John is the most spiritual minded among us and seems to be favored by Jesus. He has greater understanding than the rest of us."*

Thus discussion could flow, even intensely, as they tried to get ahead of Jesus in the selection of the greatest man to serve. Though they were lacking in understanding of the nature of the kingdom, they were unselfishly trying to put a specific name where Jesus had not.

Back before the Transfiguration, Simon Peter was the first to confess that Jesus is the Son of God. Upon his confession, Jesus promised to give him the keys of the kingdom which evidently he used in announcing the gospel on Pentecost. Here in this Last Supper setting, Jesus calls attention to the test Peter would undergo, perhaps as a reminder of the promise made to him earlier. After his resurrection, Jesus said to them, *"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you."* And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, *"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"* (John 20:21-13). They were all equally involved in the kingdom.

All right, you think I have lost my sanity. You are not the first to reach that conclusion. Many other slow learners agree with you! ☺

A perverse attitude makes us more eager to interpret negatively than with compassion.

The lesson hardest to learn is that the great ones in the kingdom are those humble, unselfish persons who serve. Jesus did not establish a system of rule and authority of men in his church. He involves us all. []