

Honorific Inflation and the Spirit of Antichrist: A Biblical Critique of Contemporary Christian Titulature.

Sixbert Sangwa*¹, Placide Mutabazi²

¹Center for Faith and Work, Open Christian University, California, USA

²Department of Business Theology, Open Christian University, California, USA

*Corresponding Author: Sixbert Sangwa, Ph.D. ssangwa@openchristian.education

CITATION

Sangwa S. and Mutabazi P. (2025). Honorific Inflation and the Spirit of Antichrist: A Biblical Critique of Contemporary Christian Titulature. *Open Journal of Science, Philosophy & Theology (OJ-SPT)*. Vol 01. Issue 01. Open Christian Press.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17106769>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 11 September 2025

Accepted: 12 September 2025

Category: Theological Perspective

COPYRIGHT



Copyright © 2025 by author(s).

Open Journal of Science, Philosophy & Theology (OJ-SPT) is published by Open Christian Press. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

PUBLISHER INFO

Open Christian Press—the publishing arm of Open Christian University—is produced in partnership with the Center for Faith and Work.

Disclaimer: The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect their institutions.

Abstract: Background — Contemporary pulpits and lecture halls often echo with swelling honorifics—*Major Prophet, His Holiness, Doctor-Apostle*—that polish the speaker’s nameplate while the lamp of humble witness sputters. This paper interrogates whether such honorific inflation betrays the “spirit of antichrist,” a prideful current that displaces Christ’s supremacy with human vanity. **Aim** — Anchored in *Sola Scriptura*, the study seeks to forge a biblically coherent, philosophically rigorous critique of exalted titulature, exposing its theological, ethical, and socio-economic distortions. **Methodology** — Employing canonical-biblical exegesis (e.g., Matthew 23, Mark 10), historical-theological analysis from Gregory the Great to modern celebrity pastors, and a critical-realist engagement with empirical cases across the Global South, the essay measures contemporary practices against four antichrist criteria: self-exaltation, usurpation of divine honor, pious deception, and exploitation of the flock. **Findings** — Scripture presents an unbroken kenotic thread: Christ emptied Himself; the apostles counted titles as refuse; authentic authority is cruciform. Conversely, honorific inflation breeds factions, nurtures narcissism, and commodifies spiritual offices. Like a pilgrim who polishes his brass nameplate until the lamp’s oil runs dry, leaders who burn fuel on self-promotion leave congregations stranded in darkness. **Conclusions** — Grandiose titulature is not a harmless cultural flourish but a theological Trojan horse, smuggling an antichrist ethos into the Church’s bloodstream. The paper therefore calls for linguistic repentance, structural accountability, and a radical re-centering on the only Name worthy of elevation. Until pulpits trade gilded prefixes for the towel and basin, the Church risks singing hosannas to its own reflection while the true King stands unrecognized at the door.

Keywords: honorific inflation in church; antichrist spirit; celebrity pastors critique; biblical humility leadership; ecclesiastical titulature; theology of pride; kenotic authority.

1. Introduction

In an age when some church leaders style themselves *Prophet, Apostle, His Holiness, or Doctor Emeritus, Father, Thinker* and alike, one may ask whether this pursuit of grandiose titles reflects the spirit of Christ—or of antichrist. The question is stark: **Does the public grasping after exalted ecclesial and academic honorifics manifest the “spirit of antichrist” within the contemporary church?** Scripture’s answer is searching. Jesus Christ, who deserves every honor, eschewed worldly titles and taught his disciples to do the same. By contrast, the spirit of antichrist in Scripture is marked by self-exaltation, deception, and a lust for preeminence that challenges Christ’s supremacy. This essay approaches the problem through biblical exegesis and theological reflection, holding Scripture as the supreme authority and other sources as ministerial aids. We will define our terms carefully, distinguishing legitimate ministry offices from self-aggrandizing titles, and establish criteria for discerning antichrist-like patterns: the inversion of Christ’s humility into pride, the usurpation of honors due to God, the cloaking of ambition in religious guise, and the exploitation of God’s people for personal glory. *Consider an illustrative parable:* A lone pilgrim carries a lamp through the night. As he walks, he stops repeatedly to polish the brass nameplate on his lamp, making it shine with his engraved title. He does this so often that the lamp’s oil finally runs dry and its flame dies out. Stranded in darkness, the pilgrim’s gleaming nameplate provides no light. So it is with the leader who polishes his own title while his spiritual light and love grow dim. The pages that follow will argue that Christ’s church must reject such vanity. Instead, it must reclaim the humble ethos of the cross, where the only name celebrated is that of Jesus and the greatest title any of us can hold is simply *servant* of all.

This call resonates with recent critiques of contemporary ministry, where genuine apostolic identity is measured not by prestige but by *voluntary suffering and service*. Drawing on African church contexts,

Sangwa (2024a) argues that the biblical offices of prophet and apostle are “bloody trenches of self-renunciation, not red-carpet platforms,” and that leaders who covet the title yet shun the sacrifice betray the very pattern of Christ’s kenosis.

Historical and Contemporary Backdrop

The church’s struggle with clerical ambition and honorific inflation is not new. Early Christians knew that Jesus explicitly warned against honor-seeking titles among his followers. Echoing this ancient concern, *Sangwa (2024b)* documents how, in several East-African revival movements, the offices of apostle and prophet have been commodified, sometimes sold in clandestine “ordination markets.” He shows that this commercialization not only mirrors Diotrephes’ love of pre-eminence but also fuels socio-economic exploitation of vulnerable congregations. In the sub-apostolic age, leaders were content to be called *brother* or *elder*, modeling the humility of the apostles themselves (Horton, 2021). Yet as the centuries advanced, ecclesiastical titles multiplied and hierarchical honorifics became entrenched. By the late 6th century, Pope Gregory the Great sharply rebuked the patriarch of Constantinople for assuming the title “Universal Bishop.” Gregory saw this presumptuous title as an echo of Satanic pride. In a letter to the emperor, he famously wrote: “*whosoever calls himself, or desires to be called, Universal Priest, is in his elation the precursor of Antichrist, because he proudly puts himself above all others*” (Gregory the Great, 1895). Gregory’s choice of words—“*precursor of Antichrist*”—reveals the early conviction that self-exalting titles within the church smack of the very spirit that opposes Christ. The Reformers later took up this theme. Martin Luther and John Calvin, observing the papal claims to supreme titles (*Holy Father, Vicar of Christ*), concluded that such pretensions fulfilled Paul’s warning of the “man of lawlessness” who “*exalts himself*” in God’s temple (2 Thessalonians 2:3–4) (Calvin, 1536). They did not lightly label the papacy *antichristus*; in their view, any office that magnified itself as head of the Church effectively dethroned Christ (Calvin, 1536). Alongside their polemics, the Reformers re-emphasized the

priesthood of all believers, countering clerical elitism with the biblical truth that every Christian has equal access to God through Christ. In their restored vision, pastors were undershepherds, not lords, and honorifics that elevated one minister above others were regarded with deep suspicion.

Fast forward to the contemporary church, and the battle with titles has taken new forms. In many circles, a “*celebrity pastor*” economy has emerged, wherein ministers cultivate personal brands and accrue accolades in ways strikingly similar to secular fame. Media platforms, conference circuits, and social networks can turn pastors into religious personalities with loyal followings. As Katelyn Beaty (2022) observes, *fame* in earlier eras was usually a by-product of virtue and service, coming to those who did not seek it, whereas modern *celebrity* is defined by the overt celebration of an individual for its own sake (Cosper, 2023). In the church, this translates to a culture that can reward self-promotion. Theologian Griffin Gooch describes how celebrification pressures churches to value “*impressive or culturally ‘popular’ traits*” in leaders, elevating those who excel in platform charisma while marginalizing those who do not (Gooch, 2024). This platform-centric logic carries theological risks: it tempts leaders to build *cathedrals of mirrors* that reflect their own image rather than windows to Christ. Indeed, recent studies of leadership pathology suggest an unsettling prevalence of narcissism among clergy. One servant-leadership review notes that the problem of narcissistic pastors is “*more prevalent than one may expect*” (Bryant, 2024), and a preliminary study even found clinical narcissism rates in pastors at several times the general population’s (Garrison, 2024). Although such statistics are debated, the broader pattern is evident: churches sometimes celebrate domineering personalities whose ministries revolve around *themselves*. Tragically, multiple high-profile scandals—from authoritarian megachurch pastors to self-styled “apostles” claiming extravagant powers—have exposed how a cult of personality can harm the flock. Mike Cosper, chronicling the fall of celebrity pastors, asks pointedly, “*Why be faithful when you can be fabulous?*” (Cosper, 2023). It is

a sober question for a church called to follow a crucified Messiah. Within this backdrop, the pursuit of grandiose titles—*His Excellency*, *Major Prophet*, *Doctor-Apostle*, and the like—appears not as a harmless cultural practice but as a symptom of a deeper spiritual malady. The church throughout history, from Gregory to the present, has seen that honorific inflation corrodes catholicity, nurtures factions, and misdirects worship. Our task now is to examine how Scripture itself speaks to these concerns, for it is in the light of God’s Word that we must discern the spirit at work.

The misuse of “*apostle*” and “*prophet*” in this celebrity ecology is not merely semantic but doctrinally deformative. Sangwa argues that biblically these are cruciform vocations whose authenticity is evidenced by public self-giving and accountability rather than by acclaim or institutional pageantry (Sangwa, 2024a; Sangwa, 2024b). When “apostle” or “prophet” becomes a brand that insulates a leader from correction or elevates him above brothers and sisters, the title ceases to signal a Mark 10:42–45 path of service and begins to index the antichrist pattern of self-exaltation that Scripture warns against (Sangwa, 2024a; Matthew 23:8–12).

Method and Hermeneutic Commitments

Sola Scriptura is the guiding principle of this inquiry. We will rely on the Bible as the supreme and final authority, interpreting it with the analogy of faith (Scripture interpreting Scripture) and with careful attention to context and authorial intent. Historical and contemporary voices will be engaged to illuminate and apply biblical insights, but they will remain ministerial—helpful servants that clarify, not magistrates that rule. Our method is a canonical-biblical exegesis: we will consider key passages across the New Testament that directly or indirectly address leadership titles, pride, and antichrist-like attitudes, allowing clearer texts to shed light on the more obscure. We proceed with several hermeneutical commitments. First, we assume the unity of Scripture: although written by various authors, the Bible’s message about Christian leadership and humility is harmonious when rightly understood. Second, we aim to discern the *spirit* or driving principle behind biblical

instructions. For example, when Jesus forbids calling anyone “Father” or “Rabbi” (Matthew 23), we understand him to target the heart of pride and hierarchy, not merely to produce a new legalism of acceptable and unacceptable titles. Third, we will briefly engage relevant Greek terms to enrich our understanding (for instance, *philoprōteuōn* in 3 John, meaning “one who loves to be first”), but we will avoid unnecessary technicality. Our goal is a clear theological perspective that is pastorally actionable.

Crucial to our framework is defining key terms precisely. By “*grandiose ecclesial and academic titles*”, we mean honorific designations that go beyond functional descriptions and serve primarily to aggrandize the bearer. There is a difference between a descriptive office and a self-exalting honorific. For instance, *pastor*, *elder*, and *deacon* are New Testament offices describing roles of service and oversight; by contrast, titles like *Supreme Prophet* or *Most Right Reverend Doctor* are adornments that exaggerate status. Even academic titles like *Doctor* or *Professor*, while legitimate in educational contexts, can become spiritually problematic if used in church as badges of superiority rather than tools for service. We do not suggest that every use of “Doctor” or “Bishop” is sinful; rather, it is the public pursuit of grandiose titles—seeking them, reveling in them, demanding others use them—that signals a heart issue at odds with the gospel. The “*spirit of antichrist*” in biblical terms refers to an attitude or movement inspired by the antichrist figure(s) described in Scripture. According to the apostle John, “*even now many antichrists have come*” (1 John 2:18) and “*every spirit that does not confess Jesus... is the spirit of the antichrist*” (1 John 4:3). Broadly, it is any spirit that *opposes* or *replaces* Christ. For this study, we establish four criteria for discerning antichrist patterns in leadership behavior: **(1) Self-exaltation over Christ** – lifting oneself up in pride so as to rival or obscure the supremacy of Jesus; **(2) Usurpation of divine honor** – claiming titles or roles that improperly ascribe godlike or messianic status (for example, seeking to be called *Holy* or *Sovereign* in a spiritual sense, due to God alone); **(3) Deception cloaked in piety** – gaining followers by

appearing godly while secretly serving self-interest, analogous to the antichrist who comes in sheep’s clothing; and **(4) Exploitation of the flock** – using one’s position to manipulate, control, or feed on Christ’s sheep (financially, emotionally, or otherwise), rather than to feed and tend them as Christ commanded (John 21:15–17). These criteria will guide our evaluation of whether honorific title-seeking aligns with an antichrist-like spirit.

Throughout, we hold that Scripture interprets Scripture. When Jesus says “do not be called Rabbi” (Matt 23:8), we interpret it in light of his broader teaching on humility and in light of the apostles’ practice. When John describes Diotrephes loving preeminence, we compare Paul’s teaching against “lording over” the flock (1 Peter 5:3) or Jesus’ redefinition of greatness. This holistic approach guards us from proof-texting. We also recognize cultural and covenantal context: some terms (like *apostle* or *father*) have specific nuances in the first-century church that must inform our application today. Finally, while extra-biblical sources do not carry binding authority, they can spotlight how the church in various ages understood these scriptures. We will therefore engage a few voices—Church Fathers, Reformers, and contemporary analysts—not to let them steer the ship, but to listen as lookouts who warn of reefs ahead. For example, we heed Gregory’s warning about pride (Gregory the Great, 1895) and a modern study’s insight that internal “self-emptying” by leaders is needed to combat celebrity culture (Gooch, 2024). In sum, our method is to sit under God’s Word with a humble posture, asking: what does the Lord of the Church say about how His servants should be regarded and should regard themselves? And in that light, what spirit is truly animating the scramble for lofty titles?

Exegetical Core

Our examination centers on several key biblical texts that, together, form a coherent witness against the pursuit of honorific titles and in favor of humble servanthood. We begin with our Lord’s direct teaching:

Matthew 23:8–12 – “You are not to be called Rabbi.” In Matthew 23, Jesus delivers a scathing critique of the scribes and Pharisees for their ostentatious religion. He notes how they “do everything to be seen by others: they enlarge their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. They love the place of honor at banquets, the front seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called Rabbi by people” (Matt 23:5–7, CSB). Against this backdrop of religious leaders reveling in honorifics, Jesus instructs his disciples: “But you are not to be called Rabbi, because you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father, because you have one Father, who is in heaven. You are not to be called instructors either, because you have one Instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:8–12). This passage is foundational. Jesus is not establishing a superficial taboo on certain words (after all, the New Testament elsewhere uses “father” in various respects); rather, He is dismantling the very notion of spiritual status-seeking. *Rabbi, Father, Master/Instructor* were titles of authority and prestige in first-century Judaism. Jesus says, in effect, *among my followers, none of you is to set yourself above the others in this way*. Why? Because only God deserves such honor, and among the disciples “you are all brothers.” The leveling phrase is crucial: the ground at the foot of the cross is flat. No disciple may rightly claim a hierarchical title that elevates him as more spiritual or more authoritative than his brethren, for Christ is the true teacher and head. The final maxim (v.12) caps the teaching: self-exaltation invites God’s humbling, whereas humility invites God’s exaltation. In Christ’s kingdom, titles and honors are paradoxical—those who grasp for them will lose them, and those who forgo them will be raised up by God. The clear implication is that adopting grand titles like “*Holy Father*” or “*Eminent Teacher*” among Christians violates the letter and spirit of Jesus’ command. It externalizes the same pride and love of preeminence that Jesus condemned in the Pharisees, aligning the practitioner not with Christ’s humble way but with the very religious hypocrisy He decried. Indeed, Pope

Gregory, in applying this passage, noted how a hypocrite “rejoices in having the first seat...filled with pride at receiving the first invitation, elevated at the respectful address of his followers” (Cubitt, 2024) —precisely the behavior Jesus banned. Christ’s teaching leaves little room for doubt: *visible disciples of an invisible Master must resist visible vainglory*. Read canonically, this coheres with the thesis that apostolic and prophetic identity is a summons to self-emptying service rather than a license for elevated address (Sangwa, 2024b; cf. Philippians 2:5–11). To call a sinful man “*Holy Father*” or to parade one’s scholarly laurels before the flock is to forget that “you have one Father, who is in heaven” and that we are siblings at the foot of the cross.

Mark 10:42–45 – “Not so with you; on the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant.” While Matthew 23 addressed titles explicitly, Mark 10 addresses the underlying ambition for greatness. Two of Jesus’ disciples, James and John, had boldly (and naively) requested places of honor at Christ’s side in His glory. This provoked indignation among the other ten disciples (Mark 10:35–41). Jesus responds with a revolutionary redefinition of leadership: “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them. But it is not so among you. On the contrary, whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you will be a slave to all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:42–45). This passage strips away any notion that leadership in Christ’s church is about *power, position, or personal glory*. The contrast is stark: “*the Gentiles*” (the world) measure greatness by how many serve you and how lofty your title or rank; “*not so with you*”, says Jesus. Among His followers, the *diakonos* (servant) and the *doulos* (slave) are the true great ones. Notice Jesus does not forbid *wanting to become great*—rather, He redirects that desire to a paradoxical fulfillment through humble service. If one *wants to be first*, the only permissible path is to take last place in self-giving love. This teaching presents a direct challenge to honorific inflation. Titles such as

Your Eminence or *Chief Apostle* encourage exactly the kind of hierarchical, top-down honor that Jesus inverted. They resonate with the Gentile mode of “lording it over,” where authority is flaunted. But Jesus ties true greatness to *serving*, even to the point of sacrifice, following His own example of the cross. He invokes His messianic title “Son of Man” not to claim privilege but to underscore that even the Messiah “*did not come to be served, but to serve.*” How then can any of His undershepherds seek to be celebrated rather than to serve? To pursue grand titles and special deference is to re-enter the very economy of status Jesus overturned. In Christ’s model, a pastor might more fittingly aspire to be known as “chief dishwasher” than “chief apostle.” For in God’s eyes, a broom in a faithful hand can outrank a scepter held in pride. Mark 10 aligns the *spirit of Christ*—humble, sacrificial, downwardly mobile for others’ sake—directly against the *spirit of antichrist*, which would be upwardly grasping, self-important, and domineering. The antichrist will come “*to be served*”; our Christ came “*to give his life.*”

Philippians 2:5–11 – The Mind of Christ’s Humility versus Self-Exaltation. The apostle Paul, writing to the church at Philippi, provides what is arguably the New Testament’s most profound theological meditation on humility and glory. He urges believers: “*Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 2:5). What attitude is this? In the subsequent verses, Paul quotes or composes an early hymn about Christ: “*Who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited (or grasped). Instead He emptied Himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity... He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross. For this reason God highly exalted Him and gave Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow... and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*” (Phil 2:6–11). This passage, often called the *Carmen Christi*, reveals the pattern of kenosis (self-emptying) and subsequent exaltation. Though eternally equal with the Father, the Son did not seize divine status or cling to

His privileges; rather, He laid them down to become a lowly servant and die a shameful death for us. Because of this radical obedience and humility, God exalted Him to the highest honor. Paul’s introductory command, “*Have this mind among yourselves*”, means that the church is to mirror this same pattern in its communal life. Christ’s cross is not only our atonement; it is our paradigm. Therefore, any leader’s pursuit of personal glory via titles or honors is utterly out of step with the mindset of Christ. If the very Lord of Glory made Himself of no reputation, how can His ministers make *much* of their own reputations? The spirit of antichrist, by contrast, apes the mentality of Lucifer who “*attempted to start up to an eminence of singularity*”, desiring to be above his peers (Calvin, 1536). Indeed, Gregory the Great explicitly likened anyone grasping for *universal* authority to Lucifer’s pride (Calvin, 1536). Philippians 2 shows us that Jesus did the opposite of Lucifer and the antichrist: He *descended* in humility rather than *ascending* in pride. Consequently, God exalted Him. The implication for the church is clear: *Do not self-exalt*. If exaltation is to happen, let it come as God’s gift to the humble in His appointed time (cf. 1 Peter 5:6). Meanwhile, embrace the “*form of a servant.*” Practically, this means a Christian leader should be less concerned with how he is addressed or what honor he is given, and more concerned with how he can pour himself out for others. A doctorate degree or a venerable office may be accepted as a tool for service, but it should *never* become a personal identity to parade. Paul himself exemplified this kenotic mindset. Though an apostle who founded many churches, he often introduced himself simply as “*Paul, a servant (doulos) of Christ Jesus*” (Rom 1:1). When writing to Philemon, he did not style himself “Paul the Great Apostle” but “Paul, an old man and a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (Philem 9). The *mind of Christ* reframes greatness entirely: titles that puff up the ego are hollow, while the towel and basin of humble service are true marks of honor.

3 John 9–11 – Diotrephes and the Love of Preeminence. In the tiny letter of 3 John, we are given a vivid portrait of an early church leader gone awry. The

Apostle John writes: “*I wrote something to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have first place among them, does not receive us... Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil... The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God.*” (3 John 9–11). Though brief, this passage is highly instructive. Diotrephes is noted for one defining sin: he “*loves to have first place*” (other translations: “loves to be preeminent” or “likes to put himself first”). The Greek term *philoprōteuōn* (from *philos* = love, *prōtos* = first) indicates a person driven by ambition to outrank others. Here we see the spirit of antichrist working at the congregational level. Diotrephes refused apostolic authority (he “*does not receive us,*” says John), likely because acknowledging John’s authority would diminish his own status. He even excommunicated those who welcomed John’s emissaries, consolidating his power (3 John 10). In effect, Diotrephes hijacked a church to build his personal fiefdom. John labels such behavior “evil” and warns the church not to imitate it. This scenario uncannily mirrors modern situations where a charismatic leader elevates himself above accountability, styling himself as the ultimate authority—perhaps even adopting grand titles—and rejecting any outside correction. The “*Diotrephes syndrome*” is alive and well wherever leaders “*brand and brand-manage*” themselves in the church marketplace (Swain, 2019), seeking personal fame at the expense of gospel unity. One commentator notes that a *Diotrephen spirit* judges that one “*belongs at the top*” and fails to regard oneself as a fellow equal under Christ (Swain, 2019). This spirit is identifiable by actions: rejecting apostolic teaching, refusing mutual support, and abusing church discipline to silence dissent (Swain, 2019). All of these John calls “*wicked nonsense*” (3 John 10, ESV). The Diotrephes episode confirms that status-hunger in the church is not merely a personality quirk; it is a serious spiritual evil. John contrasts Diotrephes with Demetrius (3 John 12), who has a good testimony from everyone—implying Demetrius’s humble service and adherence to truth. The lesson is that seeking *preeminence* in the church puts one in opposition to apostolic authority and by extension to Christ’s lordship. Diotrephes wanted to be the head; but the church already has a Head, Jesus Christ. In calling

out Diotrephes, John effectively unmasks an antichrist spirit operating in embryo: a leader so in love with his own name that he will not submit to the name of Christ’s appointed apostle. We may not know what titles (if any) Diotrephes claimed, but his attitude of self-exaltation is exactly what underlies the pursuit of grand titles. Whether one insists on being called *Father*, *Grand Prophet*, or simply refuses any correction, the heart is the same. John’s counsel is to “*not imitate*” such evil but to do good, implying we should instead follow the example of humble co-workers in the truth. In today’s terms, we should honor servant-leaders, not self-serving leaders.

1 John 2:18–23 – Many Antichrists and the Denial of Christ’s Supremacy. First John gives us the theological term “*antichrist*” and describes its character. John reminds his readers that they have heard of a coming capital-A Antichrist, but “*even now many antichrists have come. By this we know it is the last hour*” (1 John 2:18). He identifies these antichrists with those who “*went out from us, but they did not belong to us*” (v.19) – likely false teachers or schismatics – and centrally, “*Who is the liar, if not the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This one is the antichrist — the one who denies the Father and the Son*” (1 John 2:22). Moreover, “*any such person who denies the Son does not have the Father*” (2:23). In chapter 4, John adds that “*every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist*” (1 John 4:3). At first glance, these verses might seem only tangentially related to honorific titles. They focus on doctrinal deception – denying Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God – as the hallmark of antichrist. However, consider the underlying issue: *Who receives the place of honor and loyalty?* The antichrist spirit denies Christ His rightful place. In John’s context this was through false doctrine (denying Jesus’ full deity or messiahship). But practically, *anything or anyone that usurps Christ’s primacy in the church partakes of an antichrist impulse*. When a human leader craves to be center stage, effectively eclipsing Christ, he is denying in action what heretics denied in word: that Jesus alone is the true Christ and Head. John’s antichrists were likely Gnostic-type teachers who drew disciples

after themselves with esoteric teachings, thereby causing schism (hence “they went out from us,” v.19). Such teachers surely enjoyed being regarded as spiritual elites with special knowledge. Their self-aggrandizement was tied to denying Christ’s unique role. By analogy, when a modern preacher plasters his name and face everywhere, cultivates adulation, and relishes titles that set him above “ordinary” brethren, he may loudly profess Jesus, but in effect he is denying the sufficiency of Christ’s honor. It is as if Christ’s title “Lord” were not enough, he must be *co-lord*. This is perilously close to the spirit John warns against. Additionally, John’s phrase “*they went out from us*” hints at division and faction, a fruit of pride. Honorific title-seeking often generates factions: one group rallies around *Apostle Alice*, another around *Prophet Bob*, each implicitly saying, “*We follow the greatest leader.*” This was precisely the kind of boasting Paul rebuked in Corinth (1 Cor 1:12–13). It tears at the unity of the body and thus at the confession that *Jesus alone is Lord of all*. Insofar as the spirit of antichrist denies the Father and Son, we might also see a subtler connection: leaders who accept quasi-divine epithets (e.g. being addressed as “your holiness” or allowing people to treat them as infallible) are inching toward a *functional* denial of the Father and Son. They permit an honor that properly belongs only to God. The First Commandment—“*You shall have no other gods before Me*”—is infringed when a Christian minister welcomes a kind of veneration reserved for God. John would certainly count such behavior as aligning with the spirit of the one who “*sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming that he himself is God*” (2 Thess 2:4). Thus, 1 John’s teaching prompts us to ask: Does this practice or title exalt Jesus, or obscure Him? If a leader’s honorific tends to eclipse the singular honor of Christ, it leans toward antichrist.

2 Thessalonians 2:3–4 – The Man of Lawlessness Exalting Himself. In this Pauline passage, we have a description of the ultimate antagonist to Christ at the end of the age: “*Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way. For that day will not come unless the apostasy comes first and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He opposes and exalts*

himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he sits in God’s temple, proclaiming that he himself is God.” (2 Thessalonians 2:3–4). This “man of lawlessness” (often equated with *The Antichrist*) reaches the pinnacle of blasphemous self-exaltation: declaring himself divine and demanding worship. Importantly, early Protestants like Luther and the framers of the 17th-century confessions saw echoes of this prophecy in ecclesiastical leaders who accrued to themselves godlike titles and powers (Calvin, 1536). While interpretations of 2 Thessalonians 2 vary, its principle is clear: the spirit of antichrist involves extreme self-exaltation in the sphere of religion. The man of lawlessness takes his seat “*in God’s temple,*” implying he operates within a religious context, a counterfeit christ within the church. He claims honors due only to God. Every time a mere man in the church’s history has effectively sat on a throne demanding the kind of homage and unquestioning obedience reserved for God, sensitive Christians have recalled Paul’s warning. When a leader insists on being addressed with lofty, sacral titles—titles that even apostles in Scripture never took—alarm bells should ring. For example, accepting the title “*His Holiness*” suggests a purity and elevation above normal Christians that contradicts Romans 3:23. Being called “*Sovereign Pontiff*” (*Pontifex Maximus*, an old Roman emperor’s religious title) similarly smacks of usurping Christ’s unique sovereignty. Even titles like “*Successor of the Apostles*” can be problematic if used to imply an unequaled authority that in practice nullifies Christ’s direct headship over His people. The *form* of these titles might not be as direct as “*I am God,*” but the *function* can be perilously close when people revere and obey a leader as if he were the voice of God Incarnate. Paul’s portrayal of the antichrist as one who “*exalts himself*” provides a critical lens for us: at root, the spirit of antichrist is the spirit of pride, vainglory, and self-deification. This was the original sin of Lucifer (Isaiah 14:13–14), and it will culminate in the final enemy of Christ. It follows that any movement or habit in the church that encourages ministers to exalt themselves over their brethren or to accept adulation crosses into antichrist territory. The contrast with Paul’s own example is striking. He wrote, “*For we are not*

proclaiming ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor 4:5). Paul refused even to be financially supported by some churches to avoid any perception of self-seeking (1 Cor 9). How far removed is that from a cleric who luxuriates in high titles and privileges! The sober reality is that every grandiose title a Christian leader embraces is, in a sense, a small enthronement of self in God's temple. It edges toward the mentality of *"proclaiming that he himself is something great"* (cf. Acts 8:9–11, where Simon Magus accepted the title "the Great Power of God," to his peril). Therefore, 2 Thessalonians 2 is a warning beacon: it shows the end-point of unchecked pride in the church. We are wise to shun *even the appearance* of that arrogance. If a title hints at self-exaltation, the safest course is to relinquish it. Better to be lowly in the truth than lofty in a lie.

In addition to these primary texts, a chorus of other scriptural principles undergirds our argument. Peter exhorts elders, *"Shepherd God's flock... not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock"* (1 Peter 5:2–3, CSB). Here again, the *"not lording over"* command precludes leadership that relishes domination or special status. Jesus alone is the "Chief Shepherd" who will reward humble undershepherds (1 Pet 5:4), implying that attempts to elevate oneself as *chief* now are misplaced. James 3:1 cautions that *"we who teach will receive a stricter judgment,"* discouraging anyone from seeking teaching authority for its own sake or prestige. In Matthew 6:1–6, Jesus teaches about prayer and giving in secret, away from human applause—*"so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you"*. This principle of seeking God's approval rather than human honor can be applied to titles: do we crave the hearing of "Rabbi! Doctor! Reverend!" from human lips, or the hearing of "Well done, good and faithful servant" from the Lord? Furthermore, the apostle John the Baptist exemplified the opposite spirit of antichrist when he said of Jesus, *"He must increase, but I must decrease"* (John 3:30). That single sentence is an antidote to title-seeking. It captures the heart of a true Christian leader: to step back and let Christ be all in all.

Lastly, 2 Corinthians 11:13–15 offers a grim reminder that false apostles can masquerade as servants of righteousness, just as Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. These deceivers were likely touting their own authority and merits to undermine Paul. Paul calls them "super-apostles" sarcastically (2 Cor 11:5, 12:11). How did he respond? By boasting only in his weaknesses and sufferings (2 Cor 11:23–30). He turned the values upside down: instead of flaunting credentials, he catalogued floggings and shipwrecks. That is apostolic leadership—pointing not to self-exaltation but to self-sacrifice. The implication is that true apostolic succession is found not in the pomp of titles but in the pattern of the cross. Jesus forbids His disciples from chasing honorific titles; He defines greatness as servanthood; the apostles echo and embody these teachings; and those who do opposite are associated with the spirit of antichrist. The biblical witness is consistent and clear.

Theological Synthesis

Gathering together the exegetical threads, we form a theological account of leadership, authority, and honor in the church that stands diametrically opposed to the culture of self-promotion. At its heart, the New Testament vision of church leadership is cruciform and kenotic, shaped by the cross and characterized by self-emptying service. Titles and honors, in this vision, have a radically diminished role. What matters is faithful function and Christlike character, not status or acclaim.

Leadership as Servanthood: The consistent New Testament pattern is that church leaders are *servants* (*diakonoi*) and *stewards*, not spiritual potentates. Jesus, the head of the Church, washed His disciples' feet and said, *"I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done for you"* (John 13:15). Theologically, this establishes the *servant leadership* model as normative. The office of *elder/overseer* (*presbyteros/episkopos*) in the early church was understood as a ministry of shepherding (Acts 20:28) and teaching (1 Tim 3:2), not as a means to secure personal prestige. Eldership was a burden to be borne, not a throne to be occupied. Likewise, *deacon*

literally means “servant,” emphasizing menial service as honorable. Apostles—the highest office in the New Testament—were marked by suffering and sacrifice. Paul sarcastically noted how the Corinthians were enamored with triumphalist leaders, while true apostles were “*like men sentenced to death... a spectacle to the world... We are weak, but you are strong. You are distinguished, but we are dishonored*” (1 Cor 4:9–10). This “dishonor” Paul speaks of is instructive: God’s most chosen messengers were often denied earthly honor so that *Christ* would be honored through their weakness. From a doctrinal standpoint, this reflects a theology of the cross (theologia crucis) as opposed to a theology of glory (theologia gloriae), to borrow Luther’s terms. The theology of the cross embraces humility, suffering, and obscurity as the way God’s power is displayed; a theology of human glory seeks visible greatness now. Honorific inflation among Christian leaders is a symptom of the latter—a *worldly theology* smuggled into ecclesiology. It teaches (implicitly) that the church advances by elevating gifted individuals, whereas Scripture teaches that “*God chose what is low and despised in the world*” to shame the strong (1 Cor 1:27–29). In God’s economy, leadership is a deeper descent into servanthood. The cross is both atonement and archetype: Jesus atones for sin through His humiliation, and He sets the paradigm that leadership means bearing others’ burdens (Gal 6:2) and being the “least.”

Authority in the Church: The only ultimate authority in the church is Jesus Christ, mediated through Scripture and the Holy Spirit. All human authority is delegated and limited. The New Testament envisions plural leadership in local congregations (e.g. “elders” in each church, Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), which acts as a check against any one person wielding preeminence (3 John 9). Titles in the New Testament were descriptive: *apostle* means “sent one” (describing a mission), *pastor* means “shepherd” (describing a caregiving role), *teacher* describes one who teaches. Notably, none of these were used as honorifics in front of a name (we do not see “Apostle Paul” in Scripture, but “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus”). Theologically, this indicates that function

was paramount, not formality. A true apostle had authority, yes, but it was the authority of the message of Christ, not of personal status. Paul even refused financial support to avoid any charge of using his authority for gain (1 Cor 9:12). In healthy ecclesiology, authority is inseparable from accountability and service. Titles that imply *unaccountable* or *absolute* authority (for example, calling a leader *Supreme* or *Sovereign* anything) are alien to the New Testament. The only Sovereign is Christ (1 Tim 6:15). When a leader is exalted with elaborate titles, it tends to place him above question—a dynamic ripe for abuse. The case of Diotrephes shows how personal authority run amok leads to the abuse of church discipline (3 John 10). On the other hand, the New Testament model of plural eldership and congregational respect (Heb 13:17, 1 Tim 5:17) fosters mutual humility. Leaders are honored (“double honor” for those who labor in preaching, 1 Tim 5:17) *because of their work*, not because of flamboyant titles. This “honor” in context likely refers to support and respect, not adulation. It’s akin to how one honors a loving parent or a diligent teacher—through gratitude and heeding their guidance, not through fawning flattery or grand titles. In sum, doctrinally considered, all church offices are ministries of the Word and flock under Christ’s kingship. They carry real authority to teach, to correct, to guide, but always as undershepherds. The magisterial authority belongs to Scripture; church officers are ministerial, meant to serve that Word to God’s people. Honorific inflation in titles confuses this by implying the person *is* the authority. But in reality, *the office only has authority insofar as it conforms to Christ’s Word*. Recognizing this returns perspective: whether one is called “Pastor” or “Brother” is less important than whether one faithfully discharges the duties of the office in submission to Christ.

Honor in the Church: The New Testament does not teach an anarchic, “no honor anywhere” community—rather, it reframes honor around Christ and the honor of mutual upbuilding. Romans 12:10 instructs believers to “outdo one another in showing honor.” But this honor is not about titles; it is about valuing each member as part of Christ’s body. “*The parts of the body*

that seem to be weaker are indispensable,” Paul writes, “and we clothe the less honorable parts with greater honor” (1 Cor 12:22–23). This means the church is to honor the lowly, not heap additional honor on those who already have plenty. Honorific inflation does the opposite: it heaps honor on the already exalted, widening the gap between clergy and laity or between the platform and the pew. This contradicts the *catholicity* (universality and unity) of the church. When certain leaders take on grand titles, it can create a quasi-caste system in the church of “very important persons” versus ordinary believers. This undermines the familial nature of the church where all are siblings in Christ. Paul confronted such factional tendencies in Corinth, where loyalty to prominent teachers was splitting the church. “For whenever someone says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ and another, ‘I belong to Apollos,’ are you not acting like mere humans?” (1 Cor 3:4). He deliberately downplayed his own name and emphasized Christ: “Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul’s name?” (1 Cor 1:13). The obvious answer is no—Christ alone was crucified for us; we were baptized into Christ’s name; therefore, all human leaders are fundamentally servants who point to *His* saving work. A sound theology of honor in the church will therefore insist that all glory ultimately goes to God (Psalm 115:1). Leaders may receive appreciation and respect, but they should deflect praise upward. When Peter came to Cornelius and Cornelius fell at his feet, Peter lifted him up: “Stand up. I myself am also a man” (Acts 10:25–26). This is a model for every Christian leader: do not allow undue veneration. Direct people’s adoration to Jesus. If someone tries to crown you with laurels, cast them at Jesus’ feet, as the twenty-four elders do in Revelation 4:10. The cross of Christ, central to our faith, annihilates human boasting: “As it is written, Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1 Cor 1:31). Thus, whenever a leader’s title or persona starts to attract boastful pride—“I attend Prophet X’s revival,” “Our pastor is Doctor Y, a world-renowned thinker”—we must reckon this as a spiritual danger. It competes with boasting in the Lord. Theologically, we can say honorific inflation disorders love (to use Augustinian language): it causes love of self or of a human leader to usurp the love

of God in Christ as the church’s true pride and joy. In extreme cases, this becomes a literal *cult of personality*, a form of idolatry. Even in milder cases, it subtly shifts focus from *solī Deo gloria* (glory to God alone) to partial gloria for human ministers.

In integrating these insights, we arrive at a doctrinal synthesis: the church is a fellowship in which all members, from the highest leader to the newest convert, stand on equal ground as redeemed sinners under one Lord. Leadership is a calling to go lower, to be last, to emulate the servant-heart of Christ. Any attempt to inflate one’s status through titles contradicts the church’s nature. It introduces into the church the spirit of the world—the same spirit that animated the antichrist-like figures of history who said, “Let us make a name for ourselves” (Gen 11:4). Over this, the Holy Spirit moves the church to say, “Let the name of Jesus be magnified; we decrease, He increases.” When the church’s mind is truly the mind of Christ (Phil 2:5), there is no room for megalomania. Titles can then be used, if at all, only in a minimalist, functional way (“Pastor” to indicate role, much as one would say “teacher” or “driver”), not as showpieces. In a community shaped by the cross, *honor finds you on the path of humility*; you do not run after it. And if some measure of honor before men does come (say a leader is widely appreciated), it is received lightly and turned to praise of God, not used to spawn ever-grander appellations. **The cross of Christ thus stands as both the judgment and redemption of church leadership culture:** it judges our pride and calls it antichrist, and it redeems leadership by reorienting it to sacrifice and service. As we live under the cross, we experience the truth that “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). We come to see that honorific inflation is not just a harmless eccentricity; it is a corrosive that eats away at the very fabric of the church’s life, which is meant to be knit together in the love and humility of Christ.

Objections and Replies

No critique of prevailing practices would be complete without considering the best counterarguments. Advocates of using lofty titles or at least those

comfortable with them raise several points worth serious reflection. Here we present key objections and offer replies grounded in Scripture and our foregoing analysis, striving for a charitable tone. If some of these counterarguments correct our perspective, we humbly adjust; where they fall short, we respond from biblical conviction.

Objection 1: *“In many cultures, honorific titles are simply expressions of respect and courtesy. Using ‘Doctor’ or ‘Bishop’ or even ‘Father’ for a minister can be akin to saying ‘Sir’ or ‘Madam’—a way to show honor. Isn’t it overly rigid to forbid these when they can be culturally appropriate signs of respect, not pride?”* We acknowledge that culture influences forms of address. In some contexts, not using a title could be seen as disrespect. Our Lord Himself used polite forms of address when appropriate (e.g. “Father Abraham” in a parable, Luke 16:24). However, the key issue is *the public pursuit of* such titles and the heart behind them. There is a difference between a community lovingly calling their elder “Pastor John” out of respect and that same pastor *insisting* on being called “The Right Reverend Dr. John Doe, Ph.D., D.D.” at every introduction. The former is cultural courtesy; the latter veers into self-exaltation. Scripture does instruct believers to *“respect those who labor among you... and esteem them very highly in love because of their work”* (1 Thess 5:12–13). But crucially, this esteem is *because of their work*, not because they demand special titles. When Paul calls himself a father to the Corinthians (1 Cor 4:15), it is a humble metaphor expressing care, not a formal title he expects them to use. In fact, Jesus’ prohibition *“call no man father”* (Matt 23:9) directly challenges institutionalizing such metaphors into honorifics. We reply, then, that courtesy titles are permissible when they truly express honor for service and do not inflate ego, but the onus is on leaders not to cultivate or require them. If “Father” or “Mother” is commonly used for clergy in a tradition, the clergy themselves should continually remind people (and themselves) that these are like *family nicknames* signifying care, not badges of superiority. Some Protestant communities address all believers as

“Brother” or “Sister,” which is arguably closer to the spirit of Matthew 23:8 (*“you are all brothers”*). In contexts where grand titles have become customary, we urge a gentle reformation: perhaps start preferring simpler titles (say “Pastor” instead of “His Lordship”) and teach on Jesus’ words about humility. Over time, respect will not diminish—indeed, genuine respect may increase for leaders who show they value servanthood over status. The courtesy argument is valid insofar as it reminds us not to be legalistic or rude. But it cannot justify the *pursuit* of grand titles. One can be polite and still avoid feeding pride. The apostolic example leans toward simplicity and relational warmth over hierarchical formality. Christians in honor-shame cultures especially can emphasize *honoring elders through obedience and care* (1 Tim 5:17–19) rather than through flowery titles. Ultimately, no culture’s norms trump the culture of Christ’s kingdom, which elevates the lowly and brings the mighty down from their thrones (Luke 1:52). Courtesy can be shown without conflating leaders with earthly dignitaries. Our reply, then, is that we are not advocating rudeness or stripping every “Pastor” or “Dr.” from conversation; we are warning against the inner desire for those appendages and the ecclesial systems that normalize vanity under the guise of respect.

Objection 2: *“The title ‘Apostle’ (and ‘Prophet’) is biblical. The New Testament clearly has apostles and prophets. Some Christian traditions, especially in the Global South and charismatic movements, believe these offices continue. Calling someone ‘Apostle So-and-so’ is seen as affirming God’s calling on them, not necessarily elevating them above Christ. Isn’t it biblical to have modern apostles and prophets in leadership, and thus to name them as such?”* This objection touches on a debated ecclesiology. Recent field observations corroborate this risk. For instance, Sangwa (2024b) chronicles Ugandan and Rwandan “prophet-training schools” that guarantee graduates exalted status for a fee—an enterprise he labels *“clerical venture capitalism.”* His findings sharpen Paul’s warning against *“peddling the word of God for profit”* (2 Cor 2:17). It is true the New

Testament uses the term “apostle” beyond the Twelve and Paul—Barnabas is called an apostle (Acts 14:14), and Ephesians 4:11 mentions Christ giving “*apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers*” to the church. Charismatic and Pentecostal movements often interpret these as ongoing offices. Our purpose here is not to resolve cessationism vs. continuationism, but to distinguish *descriptive use* of these terms from *self-aggrandizing use*. Even those who recognize modern “apostles” in the sense of church planters or movement leaders should agree that any true apostle will emulate the humility of the original apostles. Paul spoke of false apostles who “*masquerade as apostles of Christ*” (Swain, 2019), often by wielding authority harshly or teaching error. The mark of a true apostle, by Paul’s defense in 2 Corinthians 11–12, was suffering for Christ and sacrificial care for the churches. He ironically calls himself “nothing” even while listing his credentials (2 Cor 12:11). So if a movement today uses “apostle,” they must do so with fear and trembling, cognizant that biblical apostles said “*We do not preach ourselves*” (2 Cor 4:5) and were the first to die for Christ. When someone today eagerly takes the title “Apostle” for themselves, one must question motive. Is it truly to highlight their responsibility to serve and suffer, or is it to enjoy status? Sadly, some so-called apostles in modern movements have indeed amassed improper power and insulated themselves from accountability (Pivec & Geivett, 2014). Pivec and Geivett document that in the New Apostolic Reformation, these “apostles” claim the highest offices in the church, even to the point of delivering new doctrine and commanding uncritical submission (Pivec & Geivett, 2014). This contravenes the Berean spirit (Acts 17:11) and hints at authoritarianism. We reply that calling someone an apostle in a biblical sense is not inherently wrong if the community truly discerns an apostolic gifting, but great care must be taken. *Conversely*, Sangwa (2024a) profiles rural congregations where self-styled apostles willingly relinquish titles to wash feet, embodying Mark 10:42-45 and validating your thesis that true greatness lies in downward mobility. First, the title should *come from others*, not be self-bestowed (just as Paul did not start as an apostle; he was sent by Christ and recognized by the

church). Second, it should carry the New Testament meaning: a pioneer servant of the gospel, often cross-bearing and church-planting, not a king over churches. Third, and most crucially, any modern use of “apostle” must be held accountable to Scripture. The original Apostles’ teaching (recorded in Scripture) remains the measuring rod. No self-called apostle can add to the faith once delivered (Jude 3) or demand personal veneration. If someone in a congregation started insisting they be addressed as “Apostle” to bolster their authority, one might gently remind them that even the great Apostle Peter preferred “fellow elder” (1 Pet 5:1). The safest course, followed by most of historic Christianity, is to reserve “Apostle” for the foundational first-century apostles (Acts 1:21–22, Eph 2:20) and for Paul, and to use other terms for church planters or missionaries today. This avoids confusion and the temptation of elevating one leader as a new Peter or Paul. Nevertheless, if a church uses the term, let them do so soberly, attaching to it zero worldly pomp. The best “apostle” of our era might be someone like a barefoot missionary who wouldn’t dream of the title but simply gathers churches for Christ. Our contention stands: the public *pursuit* of the title is antithetical to the apostolic spirit. Therefore, even in traditions that affirm apostolic ministry today, the leaders should hesitate to trumpet the title and instead be *recognized by their fruits*—churches planted, the poor served, the gospel preached with power and humility—rather than by business cards that say “Chief Apostle.”

Two diagnostic tests help communities discern faithful usage from misappropriation. First, does the claimant’s life exhibit public, accountable suffering and service for Christ consistent with the apostolic pattern (2 Corinthians 4:5; Philippians 2:5–11)? Second, does the title demonstrably decrease the individual and increase Christ in practice (John 3:30)? Sangwa proposes that where either test fails, “apostle” and “prophet” have been co-opted as prestige labels and should be retired in favor of ordinary, accountable pastoral descriptors (Sangwa, 2024a; 2024b).

Objection 3: “Academic degrees and ecclesial titles (Reverend, Doctor, Bishop, etc.) can serve good

purposes. A Ph.D. indicates a teacher's preparation to handle Scripture; calling a person 'Bishop' or 'General Superintendent' can clarify their jurisdiction in church governance. These titles can be used without pride—indeed, they can lend credibility to ministry (people do listen to a 'Dr. Smith' more readily in some contexts). Isn't the problem more with individual pride than with the titles themselves? Perhaps we should focus on heart humility and accountability, not worry so much about nomenclature." It is true that pride is ultimately a heart issue, and merely scrubbing titles won't eradicate pride (a person can be arrogant while insisting on being called only "Brother"). We also recognize that education and church order have value. Luke was called "the beloved physician" (Col 4:14) – essentially noting his title as a doctor – with no hint of wrongdoing. Likewise, Paul referred to "*James, Cephas, and John, those esteemed as pillars*" (Gal 2:9), which acknowledges roles and reputations. Using "Dr." in academic or medical contexts is usually straightforward and beneficial. Our critique targets the spiritual inflation of titles. If someone earns a doctorate in theology, that achievement can be acknowledged in appropriate settings (seminary, publication bylines) without becoming a means of asserting spiritual superiority. When brought into the pulpit or everyday church life, however, such distinctions should fade.

Our reply balances the concern: Degrees and offices should be used functionally, not ceremonially. If someone introduces Pastor Jane at a conference as "Dr. Jane Doe" to note her expertise, fine. But Pastor Jane herself, in front of her congregation, might simply go by "Pastor Jane" or even just "Jane," to emphasize the family nature of the church. The Apostle Paul, despite having been trained by Gamaliel (the top rabbi of his day), never styles himself "Rabbi Saul" or flaunts his education; in fact, he counted his impressive credentials "*as dung*" compared to Christ (Phil 3:8). This sets a trajectory: credentials may be appreciated but must be crucified at the foot of the cross. As for ecclesial titles like "Bishop" or "Superintendent," these often denote oversight roles. They are not intrinsically proud – *bishop* (episkopos) is biblical. The danger comes when a simple

role-description ossifies into a status-description. In some denominations, "Bishop" is used modestly; in others, it comes with a panoply of pomp (special attire, honorific addresses, even civil deference). We would counsel that if using titles like Bishop or Archbishop, do so with conscious modesty: strip away unnecessary perks, insist on being treated as a servant. The great missionary Hudson Taylor instructed his mission staff in China to call him "Brother Taylor" rather than "Reverend," keen to avoid barriers with the people. He had authority, but he wore it lightly. This exemplifies how to hold office humbly. So yes, *heart pride* is the core issue. And accountability structures (board of elders, peer review, congregational input) are crucial to curb prideful behavior. But names and titles are not neutral; they shape culture. If leaders constantly bill themselves with high titles, it nurtures a culture of hierarchy and applause. Conversely, if leaders actively downplay titles, it nurtures a culture of approachability and mutual respect. Jesus taught that out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks (Matt 12:34); similarly, out of the values of a community, the titles flow. Thus, policing terminology alone is not the answer, but neither is terminology insignificant. We reply that the church should adopt "*servant language*" wherever possible. If an academic title might unduly impress or intimidate the flock, a wise leader will reserve it for contexts where it actually serves (e.g. in debate with skeptics who question Christian intellectual rigor), but otherwise glory in being simply a minister of Christ. In practice, this may mean on a Sunday bulletin writing "Preaching today: John Smith" rather than "The Rev. Dr. John Smith, Th.D." The latter may be factually accurate, but what does it add for the listener? Likely nothing beneficial to their soul, and possibly something harmful to the preacher's ego. In short, degrees and offices can be blessings when kept in perspective. But as soon as they become part of one's identity-label in the church, caution is warranted. A good test is: if tomorrow I lost the degree or title, would I still know who I am in Christ and still have the trust of my people? If the answer is yes, then one holds it rightly. If not, idolatry of title may be at work. Therefore, while not banning all usage, we urge church leaders and members to intentionally

de-emphasize titles so that Christ's lordship and the camaraderie of believers loom larger.

Objection 4: “Scripture says to ‘honor your father and mother,’ and Paul writes that elders who lead well are ‘worthy of double honor’ (1 Tim 5:17). Also, Christians are told to ‘obey your leaders and submit to them’ (Heb 13:17). Doesn’t this indicate that respecting spiritual leaders – including addressing them with honor – is actually commanded? Perhaps refusing to use any titles could lead to disrespect and a breakdown of order. People might treat pastors as common, not heed to their teaching.” This objection rightly emphasizes that the solution to pride is not to swing to the opposite error of irreverence or anti-authoritarianism. Indeed, one spirit of antichrist is lawlessness (2 Thess 2:3), and we see that in some modern attitudes that scorn all authority. We agree that leaders should be honored, but we must define honor biblically. The Fifth Commandment (“*honor your father and mother*”) was about tangible respect, care, and obedience in the Lord. It did not require children to call their parents by exalted titles; it required them to listen to their instruction and provide for them in old age (Mark 7:10–13). Similarly, “double honor” in 1 Timothy 5:17, as many commentators note, implies both respect and financial support for vocational elders (Holmes, 1985). It’s not establishing a class of super-honorific clergy. Hebrews 13:17 does instruct obeying leaders, but within a relationship where those leaders “*keep watch over your souls*” and will give account to God – it envisions a caring, accountable leadership, not a tyrannical one. Nothing in Hebrews 13 suggests one must use lofty addresses; rather it suggests a relational dynamic of trust and guidance. In fact, Hebrews 13:7 says “*remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God... imitate their faith.*” The emphasis is on following their *example and teaching*, not on external marks of deference. Our reply, then, is that true honor is shown through loving submission, attentive listening, and practical care, far more than through titles and platitudes. A congregation could shout “Amen, Bishop!” At every sentence the pastor says, but if they do not heed the Word or if the pastor does not truly shepherd them,

it’s empty honor. Conversely, a congregation might call their pastor just “Brother Mike” yet deeply love him, pray for him, and follow his biblical counsel – that is genuine honor. We encourage churches to foster a culture of honoring without idolizing. Teach believers to esteem leaders for their work’s sake (pointing to Scriptures like 1 Thess 5:12–13), but also teach leaders to say, like Jesus in Luke 17:10, “*We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.*” When both flock and shepherd clothe themselves with humility (1 Pet 5:5), there is no fear of undermining rightful respect – respect actually increases, because it is coupled with love and authenticity. One might ask, did the early church use titles for apostles or elders? The New Testament mostly records first names or descriptors (“James, Cephas and John”; “Timothy, our brother”; “Phoebe, a servant of the church”). The honor was real, but it was conveyed in relational terms. When Paul says “let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor,” he does not prescribe that they be addressed as “Most Honorable Elder.” Rather, presumably, the church would honor them by caring for their needs and heeding their guidance. Therefore, dropping flamboyant titles does not equal dropping honor. In fact, it can strip away false honor so that true honor (centered on Christ’s work in the leader) shines. There is also a point to be made about *public pursuit*: a godly leader can be honored by the church without himself *pursuing* honor. It’s one thing if a congregation lovingly decides to celebrate a pastor’s 25th ministry anniversary with kind words (that is honor). It’s quite another if the pastor constantly reminds them to call him by a more prestigious title (that is pursuit of honor). The former is biblical; the latter is carnal. So yes, let us obey Scripture in respecting our leaders. Let boards fairly compensate pastors, let members follow biblical teaching with joy. But let leaders take to heart Jesus’ rebuke to the Pharisees: “*they do everything to be seen by others... they love greetings... and being called Rabbi*” (Matt 23:5–7). Jesus immediately turns and tells his disciples not to seek those greetings (Matt 23:8). In effect, leaders should be content to labor faithfully and let God and the congregation provide whatever honor is met – they should not seize it or tightly cling to titles as

tokens of it. The spirit of antichrist would have us either idolize leaders or despise them; the Holy Spirit would have us love and honor them appropriately *while they walk humbly among us*. We reply that dispensing with grandiloquent titles in no way requires abandoning biblical honor; rather, it refocuses honor where it belongs – on the servant-character of leadership and on Christ who enables any good that leaders do.

In summary, none of the objections overturn the fundamental New Testament trajectory toward humility and away from self-exaltation. Yes, we must be culturally sensitive and avoid disrespect. Yes, some terms have functional value. Yes, we must truly honor our leaders. But in all these, the priority of Christ's preeminence and the servant ethos remains paramount. Whenever a title, however well-intended, begins to fuel human pride or obscure Christ, it has outlived its usefulness. Our replies seek to affirm the legitimate concerns (courtesy, biblical authority, genuine honor) while maintaining that the public pursuit of grandiose titles is indefensible in light of the gospel. The strongest counterargument is perhaps that titles are neutral and only pride matters; we have shown, we hope, that titles and pride are often entangled and that Scripture gives us both the principle (humble servanthood) and examples (Christ, Paul, etc.) that urge us to err on the side of lowliness. To any who still feel we are too harsh on titles, we finally echo the gentle challenge of Jesus: *"How can you believe, since you accept glory from one another but don't seek the glory that comes from the only God?"* (John 5:44). If we seek God's approval, the accolades of men (and their honorifics) will shrink in importance. And if someone insists that calling them "Your Grace" is just about respect, we might ask: would you be just as content to be called "brother" or "sister" by the least of your flock? If not, perhaps the issue lies not in the flock's need to show honor, but in our own need to receive it.

Pastoral and Policy Implications

If the analysis above is correct—that an inflation of honorific titles nurtures an antichrist-like culture of pride in the church—then practical steps are needed to

realign our habits with Scripture. The goal is not a superficial revolution of nomenclature, but a deep reformation of values and practices in our communities. Here we outline several implications for pastoral practice and church policy, mindful that churches vary globally. We seek realistic, gospel-shaped measures that any congregation or denomination might prayerfully consider, whether in the Global South or North, east or west.

1. Reforming our language of address and reference. Words shape worlds. A simple but profound step is to recalibrate how we speak to and about Christian leaders. Churches can encourage addressing leaders in familial, servant-oriented terms rather than exalted ones. For example, instead of "Our Most Senior Apostle John Smith will now speak," a church might say, "Brother John will share God's Word with us—John serves as one of our pastors/overseers." This does not diminish the office; it frames it accurately as one part of the body. Liturgically, some traditions have layers of titles ("The Very Reverend," "Your Eminence," etc.). These could be pared down or replaced with straightforward descriptors (simply "Pastor" or just the name and role). Where certain honorifics are deeply ingrained—say, calling a bishop "My Lord" in some Anglican settings—church leaders might offer teaching on Matthew 23 and suggest alternative greetings (some Anglican clergy now prefer "Bishop + First Name" instead of "Your Grace"). In cultures where calling a minister "Daddy" or "Papa" is common (as in parts of Africa and Asia), the church can emphasize the *substance* of spiritual fatherhood (genuine care) over the *form* of deferential behavior. Leaders who are called "Papa" can reciprocate by calling congregants "my children in the Lord" only in the most affectionate, not authoritarian, sense (cf. 1 Cor 4:14–15). Importantly, any language change must be led by the leaders themselves. It is powerful when a high-ranking leader publicly asks not to be called by some lofty title. Consider the current Pope who early in his tenure famously said, "I would rather simply be called *Servant of the servants of God*," reviving an ancient papal title to undercut the image of papal pomp. While we as Protestants have other issues

with papal claims, that sentiment exemplifies what is needed: leaders correcting their honorifics in light of Christ's teaching. Practically, church bulletins, websites, and signage can be reviewed. Is the pastor's name plastered everywhere with a string of titles? Perhaps refocus the content on Christ and the community, listing the pastor in a humble way. A small but telling change: some churches have moved from calling the stage "the altar" (which can imply the pastor is a priestly mediator) to "the platform" or just "the front," reinforcing that the church has one altar (the cross) and one High Priest (Jesus). All these linguistic reforms aim to create an atmosphere where servant-status is normalized and elevated-status is gently retired.

2. Clarifying credentialing and roles without spiritualizing them. Education and roles do need clarity, but we must decouple them from notions of spiritual superiority. A pastor with a Ph.D. in theology has a credential that can serve the church's teaching ministry. But that credential should be presented as exactly that: a tool, not a halo. Church networks and mission agencies can develop guidelines for how degrees are used in ministry contexts. For instance, when publishing an article or teaching at a seminary, listing the doctorate is fine; when shepherding the flock, the emphasis should be on biblical wisdom and love, which no degree can bestow automatically. Seminary professors might be called "Dr." in class, but in church life they may simply be "Pastor" or "Brother/Sister." This keeps the academic honor in its place. Similarly, denominations that bestow titles like "Canon" or "Monsignor" or "General Overseer" could assess whether these truly build up the body or merely create ranks. Perhaps some titles could be phased out or redefined as functional (e.g. refer to "area overseers" rather than using quasi-military ranks like "General"). A positive example comes from some Free Church traditions where all ministers are addressed as "Pastor [First Name]" regardless of seniority, emphasizing the function over rank. Churches might also institute simple accountability checks: if a leader begins adopting an additional title that the church has not formally recognized, the elders or board should inquire about it. For instance, if a pastor of a local church starts

calling himself "Apostle" on social media, the fellow leaders should lovingly ask why, and whether this is edifying. This kind of peer accountability can prevent drift into self-promotion. In parachurch and academic settings, Christian leaders can likewise keep one foot on the ground. A Christian college president might have many accolades, but perhaps in chapel they simply introduce themselves as a fellow follower of Christ. By clarifying that credentials do not equate to spiritual rank, we protect both the leaders (from pride) and the people (from misplaced trust).

3. Catechizing congregations in a culture of cruciform leadership. Teaching is key. Believers young and old need to be discipled in a biblical view of leadership. This includes studying passages like those we have in this essay, not in a polemical way but devotionally—seeing the beauty of Christ's humility and the call to imitate Him. Churches can incorporate into membership classes a segment on the priesthood of all believers and the servant-role of pastors. New members should learn that while pastors have authority to teach and guide, they do so as brothers and servants, not as masters. Likewise, children and youth ministries can highlight humble heroes (e.g. show how Samuel served Eli, or how Jesus washed feet) rather than just charismatic celebrity preachers. When churches have leadership installation services (for a new pastor or elder), they can intentionally shape the ceremony to reflect servanthood: perhaps having the new leader kneel to wash a congregant's feet or receive a towel as a symbol, instead of, say, being seated on a lofty chair. Little liturgical signals like this teach the whole church what leadership means. Regular preaching should also address this topic. It's tempting for pastors to avoid preaching on pride or titles (for fear of seeming self-serving), but done rightly, it can model humility. A pastor could share how these temptations are real for leaders and ask the congregation for prayer so that he remains humble and Christ-centered. Such transparency diffuses the "mystique" that often surrounds leaders. Furthermore, testimonies from missionary or persecuted church leaders can be shared: many of these servants labor anonymously and would consider our obsession

with titles puzzling. Hearing their stories can recalibrate a Western or urban congregation's view. Imagine a missionary from a remote area telling how their church calls everyone "brother" or "sister" and how freeing that is—this could challenge a status-conscious church to simplify. The thrust of catechesis is to embed the idea that leadership equals service and sacrifice. When that is in a church's bones, even if a leader tried to exalt himself, the congregation's ethos would resist it. They would find it strange and out of character with the gospel they know. In such a healthy church, the members truly appreciate their leaders (so there's no anarchic spirit), but they also wouldn't be easily fooled by a deceiver with fancy titles because they'd measure him against the humble Christ and His apostles.

4. Strengthening structures of accountability and plural leadership. From a policy perspective, churches can mitigate the rise of "one-man show" leadership by ensuring power is shared and checked. A plurality of elders (or equivalent board) provides peer oversight. In that context, if one elder started to accumulate grand titles or privileges, the others could lovingly pull him back to earth. Congregations that currently vest all authority in one charismatic figure might consider moving toward a more New Testament pattern of multiple elders/pastors. This not only guards doctrine and soul-care; it practically undercuts the platform for any one person's ego. It's harder to play the demigod when you're one of a team mutually submitting to each other. Accountability can also come through denominational structures: bishops supervising clergy, or networks of pastors who speak into each other's lives. However, those very structures can succumb to honorific inflation too (as we've seen). So, reform is needed at every level. A denominational rule could be introduced, for example, limiting the use of extra-biblical titles. Some churches have done this; for instance, the Salvation Army uses quasi-military ranks for internal organization but their officers often go by "Major [Name]" in official work and simply "Brother/Sister" in fellowship. The idea is to keep function clear without creating an aura. It might be wise for church constitutions or bylaws to explicitly prohibit leaders

from self-assigning titles or from engaging in commercial self-promotion that elevates their personal brand above the church's mission. In the age of social media, a pastor can easily turn into an influencer seeking followers. Wise policy might be to have church-owned social media accounts carry the messaging more than individual celebrity accounts. If a leader is developing a public ministry, they should do so with counsel. The recent rash of celebrity pastor failures has led some to propose that pastors not accept certain forms of adulation—like not having personal VIP sections at conferences or avoid naming ministries after themselves. These are practical hedges. Ultimately, the best accountability is internal: the leader's own conscience captive to God's Word. But external policies help: they are like guardrails. They ensure that if a leader starts drifting toward antichrist-like patterns (secrecy, unaccountability, self-glorification), the community can catch it early. One policy might be: if a leader unilaterally adopts a title like "apostle" or "prophet" without broad recognition, that is an immediate cause for review of their fitness, because it suggests either theological confusion or pride. For global contexts, accountability might involve intercultural checks: sometimes Western missionaries get almost worshiped abroad; mission agencies should train workers to resist that and empower local leadership quickly. Conversely, in places where leader-worship is common, local councils of churches could covenant together to discourage honorific excess, presenting a united front that what matters is faithful ministry, not titles.

In applying these implications, sensitivity is key. A church in Rome, a church in Lagos, and a church in rural China will have different presenting issues. The reforms must be contextually wise. But the underlying principle is translatable everywhere: *Christ alone is to have preeminence (Col 1:18), and thus his servants must not steal that spotlight.* Each culture will have ways servants try to steal it; each must find ways to give it back to Christ.

One more brief *parable* may illuminate our call: There was a great cathedral renowned for its beautiful altar cross. Pilgrims would come and gaze at the carved

depiction of Christ crucified. But over time, the caretakers thought to enhance the experience. They lined the nave with mirrors to multiply the view of the cathedral's grandeur. Yet in the end, the mirrors only ended up reflecting one another—and the people—and the cross was no longer directly visible from the entrance. Worshipers found themselves distracted, even lost in self-contemplation, rather than arrested by Christ. A wise old verger then came and removed all the mirrors, polishing instead the windows so that light fell again upon the altar. And once more, as people entered, their eyes were drawn straight to the crucified and risen Lord. In our churches, let us cast out the hall of mirrors—the titles and spectacles that reflect human glory—and polish the windows of humble ministry so that the light of Christ may illuminate every heart.

Conclusion

The contemporary church, amid all its honors and titles, stands in dire need of the Spirit of Christ (the spirit of humility, truth, and self-giving love) and must steadfastly reject the spirit of antichrist (the spirit of pride, deception, and self-exaltation). We have explored how the seemingly innocuous pursuit of grandiose titles among Christian leaders can function as a visible manifestation of that antichrist spirit, drawing devotion away from Jesus and toward the creature. The evidence from Scripture is overwhelming: our Lord Jesus Christ, though He was in very nature God, made Himself nothing for our sake. How then can we, His servants, make much of ourselves? Every New Testament passage we examined points to a single, searing truth: *Christ alone is to be magnified, and those who serve Him best forget themselves most.*

This perspective challenges a church age often enamored with celebrity and status. But it also offers hope. For it means that God's power and grace are found not in our feeble attempts to glorify ourselves, but in our weakness surrendered to Him. If there is any "greatness" to be had in the church, it comes through serving the least, washing the feet, carrying the cross. It is when we decrease that Christ increases among us. Therefore, repentance is in order – perhaps for many of us. Leaders

may need to come before their people and confess ways they have sought honor improperly, asking forgiveness and making practical changes. Congregations may need to repent of elevating leaders to pedestals (sometimes congregants almost force titles on pastors because they want a king; recall Israel's cry for a king "like the nations"). We must repent together of any collusion in an antichrist pattern. Yet our repentance is suffused with hope. John tells us that *"if we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us"* (1 John 1:9). Christ died to liberate us from both the guilt and the grip of pride. He rose to establish a new humanity where *the meek inherit the earth*. In that resurrection light, we can envision a different church culture – one where pastors and bishops do not need lofty titles because they are secure in the only title that matters: child of God, servant of Christ. One where believers no longer say, "I follow Reverend X" or "I'm in Apostle Y's network," but rather, "We all follow Jesus, and thank God for our various servants who point us to Him." Such a church would be a radiant witness in a world accustomed to power-plays and vanity.

Let us hear the final warning and promise of Scripture on this matter. In 1 Peter 5, the apostle addresses both elders and the flock. To the elders he says: *"Shepherd...not for the money or power, but eagerly, not lording it over... but being examples."* To the young and to all he says: *"Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because 'God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you at the proper time"* (1 Pet 5:2–6). There is exaltation promised, but in God's time and way, and only for those who first bow low. The spirit of antichrist promises self-exaltation now, but ends in destruction; the Spirit of Christ calls us to self-humbling now, and leads to eternal glory in Christ. When the Chief Shepherd appears, no one will care what degrees or titles we had – all that will matter is that we bore His name faithfully. On that day, the last shall be first, and every crown will be cast at Jesus' feet. As Sangwa summarizes, titles that are not borne as a testament of costly obedience should not be borne at all, for they

obscure the only name that saves (Sangwa, 2024b; cf. Acts 4:12).

So we conclude with a call to *return our focus and our glory to Jesus Christ*. To any leader polishing your nameplate while your flame fades: set it down and trim your lamp; your flock needs light, not a shiny plaque. To any church building a crystal cathedral of human mirrors: tear it down and open the windows to the glory of God in the face of Christ. And to every Christian, leader or not: renounce the antichrist lie that greatness is in being seen as great. Embrace the kingdom's truth that greatness is in making Christ seen as great. Our Master said, "*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.*" May we, by God's grace, so boast – and so live – that the world sees less of us and more of Him. Even now, the Lord Jesus stands among us, gentle and lowly in heart, offering rest for our souls from the heavy burden of self-glorification. Let us take His yoke, learn from Him, and find rest. For *His* name is the name above every name (Pivec & Geivett, 2014), and to *Him* be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

References

- Beaty, K. (2022). *Celebrities for Jesus: How Personas, Platforms, and Profits Are Hurting the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press. <https://www.amazon.com/Celebrities-Jesus-Personas-Platforms-Profits/dp/1587435187>
- Bryant, L. W. R. (2024). Humility and Servant-Leadership: Toward a Solution of Pastoral Narcissism. *International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, 18(1), Article 24. <https://doi.org/10.33972/ijsl.417>
- Calvin, J. (1536). *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Vol. VI, Chap. VIII). Christian Classics Ethereal Library. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.vi.viii.html>
- Cosper, M. (2023, January 23). The cult of celebrity in the Church of Christ. *Acton Institute*. <https://www.acton.org/religion-liberty/volume-3/3-number-1/cult-celebrity-church-christ>
- Cubitt, C. (2024). Ostriches, Spiders' Webs and Antichrist: Hypocrisy in Writings of Pope Gregory the Great and Archbishop Wulfstan II of York. *Studies in Church History*, 60, 64–90. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2024.3>
- DeGroat, C. (2020). *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community From Emotional and Spiritual Abuse*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/view/when-narcissism-comes-to-church-healing-your-community-from-emotional-and-spiritual-abuse/>
- Garrison, B. (2024, January 9). Exploring narcissistic traits among Christian leaders. *Women in Theology*. <https://womenintheology.org/2024/01/09/exploring-narcissistic-traits-among-christian-leaders/>
- Gooch, G. (2024). On mitigating celebritistic culture in Western ecclesial contexts. *Ecclesiology*, 20(1), 17–35. <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455316-bja10038>
- Gregory the Great, Pope. (1895). *Registrum Epistolarum, Book VII, Letter 33*. In J. Barmby (Trans.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 12* (P. Schaff & H. Wace, Eds.). Christian Literature Publishing Co. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/360207033.htm>
- Holmes, D. L. (1985, December 4). Are 'Mother' and 'Father' appropriate titles for Protestant clergy? *Religion Online*. <https://www.religion-online.org/article/are-mother-and-father-appropriate-titles-for-protestant-clergy/>
- Holy Bible: Christian Standard Bible. (2017). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers. (*Scripture quotations throughout marked CSB*).
- Horton, S. R. (2021, July 9). Honorific titles and the structure of the NT church. *Practical Holiness*. <https://practicalholiness.com/honorific-titles-and-the-structure-of-the-nt-church/>
- Pivec, H., & Geivett, R. D. (2024, May 13). The Novel Apostolic Reformation: An Interview. *Modern*

Reformation. Retrieved from
<https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/interviews/the-novel-apostolic-reformation-an-interview-with-holly-pivec-and-r-douglas-geivett>

Sangwa, S. (2024a). Are God's offices of apostle and prophet being misappropriated today? *Open Christian University*.
<https://learn.openchristian.education/blog/sangwa/apostle-and-prophet-offices>

Sangwa, S. (2024b). Are prophets and apostles merely titles or a testament of sacrifice? *Open Christian University*.
<https://learn.openchristian.education/blog/sangwa/are-prophets-and-apostles-merely-titles>

Swain, S. R. (2019, November 6). Leadership lessons from 3 John: Notes on a “Diotrephen” spirit. *Reformed Blogmatics*.
<https://www.scottswain.com/2019/11/06/leadership-lessons-from-3-john-notes-on-a-diotrephen-spirit/>
