



Global Faculty Initiative

**The Faculty Initiative
seeks to promote the integration
of Christian faith and academic disciplines
by bringing theologians into conversation with scholars
across the spectrum of faculties
in research universities
worldwide.**

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LEADER GUIDE | CREATED ORDER AND DISORDER

MODULE 4 | HIERARCHY AND EQUALITY

Session Objectives

- To grapple with the tensions between hierarchy and equality, and to explore how a Christian response to these questions compares with that of one's discipline.

Reading

- Review the following from the last session's readings, and catch up on any pieces you missed:
 - Biggar, [Theology Brief sections 7-9](#)
 - Bell, [Valuing Profusion and Disorder in Creation, Language, and Society](#)
 - Biggar, Postscript [section](#)
- Biggar, [Theology Brief section 2](#)
- Aroney, [Covenant Orders](#)
- Find one or two entries in the 'Hierarchies' section of the [Topical Guide](#) that interest you.

Discussion Questions

Q1: Where do you see hierarchies in your culture or context? What hierarchies appear in your discipline, such as theories, subfields, and institutions?

Leader prompts:

- A hierarchy is a system where the elements are arranged in a graded or ranked order, where some are above others. When hierarchies involve people, being higher often entails having authority or leadership responsibility.
- There are many forms of hierarchy within society, such as political relationships and pedagogical relationships.
- The university has a hierarchy of research expertise or stage of career (professors – associate professors – early career researchers – postgraduate students – undergraduate students). Similarly, most corporations employ a hierarchical governance structure, in that most workers have a manager. Governmental institutions and law courts are arranged in a hierarchical

structure.

- [Bell](#) suggests that different occupations occupy different places on a social hierarchy of prestige, but this hierarchy does not align with the contribution those professions give to the functioning of society: 'We can observe in our time that one of the notable fruits of national Covid lockdowns was that we learned that the really essential workers of our society are those at the bottom of the hierarchy (and the pay scale): shelf stackers, rubbish collectors, cleaners, drivers.'
- Some cultures have understood there to be various hierarchies among the sexes, races, or other identity markers. Other cultures have resisted those hierarchies as unjust.
- In the West, equality is typically praised, while hierarchy is regarded as an attempt to oppress others. Traditional cultures may have a stronger emphasis on the need to revere one's elders or authority figures, or on other hierarchical structures.

Q2: [Biggar](#) argues that hierarchy among humans is not only inevitable but sanctioned by God: 'Functional hierarchy is morally unobjectionable, so long as functional superiors regard functional inferiors fraternally.' [Bell](#) counters, '[in Jesus' ministry,] social order is inverted, rulers are displaced and the marginalized moved to the centre.' **Evaluate these perspectives - what do you think a Christian approach to the hierarchies within society looks like?**

Leader prompts:

- It may be helpful to begin by reflecting on how you might define hierarchy (or how [Biggar](#) defines hierarchy).
- Encourage participants to argue both sides of this question, and to complexify any easy answers that are given. Try to draw out any inconsistencies, e.g. within disciplines that are suspicious of hierarchies, are the usual university hierarchies of academic rank or expertise still accepted?
- It may be helpful to distinguish between hierarchies of function (what people do) and hierarchies of ontology (being; who people are) - though as [Bell](#) notes in the quote under question 1, societies often confuse these categories by attributing higher ontological value to those who fulfil higher functions, and the reverse.
- Writing about humanity's role as stewards of creation, [Biggar](#) comments: 'since the whole of creaturely hierarchy is subordinate to the Creator, human beings stand under God. Therefore, the dominion that they exercise over non-human creatures is delegated, subject to the Creator's values and intentions, and so accountable to his moral law.' The same moral accountability can be ascribed to the way humans treat each other.
- [Aroney](#): 'hierarchy is not absolute but always relative to the ultimate authority of God.'
- [Bell's](#) question is a good one: 'How, then, do we value social hierarchy where it matters, in creative tension with the subversive teaching of Jesus and the epistles?'

Q3: What are the dangers of overemphasising equality on one hand or hierarchy on the other? Which danger does your discipline or your cultural context tend towards?

Leader prompts:

- Overemphasising hierarchy: organisations cannot innovate or are held captive to vested interest; abuses of power are ignored; the rights or needs of the individual may be subsumed within the collective; resources are hoarded by a small group rather than being distributed equitably; the majority of the population are unable to use or develop their abilities (anti-meritocratic).
- Overemphasising equality: organisations lack leadership or direction, particularly when difficult decisions must be made; delegating becomes more difficult; when responsibility is shared it's harder to hold people accountable for wrongdoing; the focus is on treating people identically rather than giving each what they need; a suspicion of experts; a weakening of the rule of law; instability.
- **Biggar:** 'To function at all, there has to be a hierarchical division of labour. That said, every member is equally important to the optimal functioning of the whole. And that is what those at the top most need to remember: that those beneath them are equally indispensable.'

Q4: How might Christian academics bring a prophetic critique to this overemphasis? Does a Christian vision of hierarchy or equality impact your research area?

Leader prompts:

- You may find it helpful to consider what Christianity teaches about the ultimate fate (eschatology) of human systems of hierarchy (see, for example, Luke 1:46-55; Philippians 2:5-11; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31). You may also wish to incorporate the biblical theme of reversal ('many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first', Matthew 19:30).
- Questions of hierarchy and equality will be relevant to any scholar whose research touches how people interact with each other (e.g. social sciences, engineering and architecture, most of the humanities). They will also be relevant within the university context where research occurs in groups, such as in the sciences – we will discuss this in question 6 of this session.
- **Biggar:** '[Christian theology] does require those at the top of any hierarchy not to abuse their position by lording it over others, but instead to treat those functionally 'beneath' them with a certain respect. Thus St Paul exhorts the Christians in Philippi, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in the very nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being

made in human likeness” (Philippians 2.5-7 NIV).’

- A prophetic critique might be brought by submitting willingly to (healthy) authority. It might also entail overturning an unjust hierarchy, or challenging the perspective that people lower down the hierarchy are less important; it will insist on the equality of value of all people. Expressing this fundamental equality will take many forms and will be influenced by the diverse ways it is challenged in different contexts.

Q5: Evaluate Biggar’s and Bell’s accounts of the Bible’s attitude towards slavery as a form of hierarchy.

Leader prompts:

- **Biggar:** ‘Philemon’s slave Onesimus has run away to Paul. Paul has decided to return him, thus respecting the institution of domestic slavery. Yet, in doing so, Paul urges Philemon to receive Onesimus back “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother” (Philemon 1.16 NIV). Functional hierarchy is morally unobjectionable, so long as functional superiors regard functional inferiors fraternally.’

Bell: ‘I am sure Biggar will not want to be heard as reprising the 19th-century arguments against Wilberforce and his companion slavery reformers: ‘slavery is fine as long as owners are nice to their slaves’. ... The good-news-to-the-poor which Jesus announced at the start of his mission has its repercussions for society as a whole.’

- **Biggar’s conclusion:** ‘I alluded to Paul’s injunction to Philemon to receive back his runaway slave, Onesimus, as “a beloved brother” (Philemon 1.15-16). When masters treat slaves ‘fraternally’—not just ‘nicely’—they treat them as, in a certain sense, equals. And in that case the institution of slavery, wherein the slave is the master’s disposable property, cannot long survive.’ Explore whether the group sees Biggar here as saying that the scripture has an implicitly emancipatory message, that is, slavery will and should ultimately be overthrown?
- Encourage participants to interrogate these quotations, and their reading of the biblical texts at hand. Does Paul’s sending Onesimus back to his master Philemon indicate an endorsement for slavery? How does calling a slave ‘brother’ undermine the hierarchy on which slavery was based?

Q6: What hierarchies do you inhabit? What would it look like for you to treat the other members of these hierarchies well or fraternally, or to act like a servant towards them?

Leader prompts:

- Hierarchies that participants might inhabit: students you teach, teaching or research assistants, faculty committees, colleagues who are earlier or further along in their careers, relations with university leadership, and administrative staff.
- It may be worth reflecting on how you participate in a church or other community organisations – do your academic credentials give you an informal kind of authority within these spaces (do people look up to you as an expert?)? What does it look like to treat others fraternally in this context?

Extra Questions

- Do you think that humans exist at the apex of the material order, as [Biggar](#) suggests? Why or why not?

In Depth

- [Peteet](#) on how accountability to healthy authority balances autonomy and hierarchy, particularly in psychiatric contexts.
- [Lam and Li](#) on how hierarchy exists in the design of AI systems.
- [Kong](#) on how human legal systems embody the ideal of human equality imperfectly.

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