

Servant leaders or leading servants?

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What's wrong with 'servant leadership'?

Most Christians if asked where the concept of 'servant leadership' originated would probably answer that it was Jesus' idea, but although Christian books on leadership have often used the phrase, it actually originated in 1970 in the writings of Robert K. Greenleaf who was writing about leadership generally, rather than from a distinctively Christian perspective:¹

'The servant-leader *is* servant first [...] It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is *leader* first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. [...] The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature'

Central to this concept is the idea that a servant leader is a servant before they become a leader – leadership is something they assume as a way to serve more faithfully according to their gifting and the need they see. Greenleaf's thinking, as with much leadership theory in America in recent decades, was, of course, influenced by Christian ideas. The USA has proved rich ground for the cross-fertilisation of ideas on leadership from the church, or at least Scripture, into the secular world and equally from the world into the church. It is this very crossing of ideas that creates the need for us to think carefully about the nature of servant leadership. How much of our practice in Christian leadership is inadvertently modelled after the world's pattern? Is it possible that we talk about servant leadership and describe ourselves or others as servant leaders but are actually giving respectability to a less noble approach to leadership by using these terms? Woolly language can have serious consequences in the church – it can allow wolves to dress as sheep, causing harm to the flock, but worse still, in the case of leadership it can allow wolves to masquerade as shepherds feeding themselves on the sheep!

The drift in what is meant by 'servant leadership' is evident when we consider how later secular leadership theorists use the term. Stephen Covey, a best-selling author on leadership who is also a Mormon, describes servant leadership as empowering others:²

'You've got to produce more for less, and with greater speed than you've ever done before. The only way you can do that in a sustained way is through the empowerment of people. [...] this kind of empowerment [...] is what Servant Leadership represents'

What is significant about this quotation is the fact that Covey now sees servant leadership (which has become capitalised) not, as Greenleaf did, as a fundamental servant attitude and motivation but as a strategy adopted by a leader to maximise productivity. The leader is now primary and he is not so much serving the people as serving the product. The leader has decided what product must be produced and the people are empowered to enable them to produce it more rapidly, in greater quantity and for a greater profit. Could this drift have happened in the church as well? Most Christian leaders would like to describe themselves as 'servant leaders', but is it possible that 'empowerment' of the laity is sometimes nothing more than a strategy for improving the productivity of the machine that is the church?

The key question, then, is what Jesus expects of Christian leaders – what He calls them to be and how He expects them to lead. Robert Banks and Bernice Ledbetter recognise the issue:³

¹ Greenleaf, Robert K. 1970. Excerpt from *The Servant as Leader*, quoted in 'What is Servant Leadership', Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership <<<http://www.greenleaf.org/whatissl/>>> (accessed 19 Aug 2012)

² Covey, Stephen. 1997. 'Foreword' in Larry C. Spears (ed.) *Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant-Leadership* (Wiley)

The trouble with the phrase 'servant leadership' [...] is that though it moves away from inadequate views of leading others, it still gets the order of the words wrong. Leadership is the key term, and servant is the qualifier. What we need today are not, as is so often suggested, more *servant leaders* but, properly understood, more *leading servants*.

This paper is a call for more leading servants. It is a challenge to reassess the nature of Christian leadership and to focus on servanthood. It is based on a conviction that if we create an environment where service is celebrated, servants appreciated and servanthood becomes the norm then we will see godly people emerging to take the responsibility of leadership among God's people after the pattern of Christ.

Service

Words for 'servant', 'serve' and 'service' appear around 100 times in the New Testament. The idea supposedly arises from Christ's words in Mark 10:42-45 where the disciples are told not to lord it over others but to be servants. Jesus did not, however, say that a Christian leader should serve (how we tend to think of it) but that those who serve will be greatest. The apostles, to whom Christ is speaking, were to be the nucleus and the foundation of the Church. They taught the church (Acts 2:42) but there is little evidence of them being decision makers – instead they focused on prayer and the ministry (service) of the word (Acts 7:1-6). The following table, adapted from Chua Wee Hian,⁴ contrasts what it means to rule over people and to be a servant among people:

"Lord over"	"Servant among"
Power base	Love / obedience base
Gives orders	Under orders
Unwilling to fail	Unafraid / a model of transformation
Absolutely necessary	Expendable
Drives like a cowboy	Leads like a shepherd
Needs strength to subject	Finds strength in submission
Authoritarian	Points to the Master's authority
Seeks personal advancement / reputation	Seeks to please and glorify the Master
Expects to be served	Expects to serve

The church, like any group of people meeting and working together needs leadership, but **what the church needs is not leaders who will serve but servants willing to fulfil the task of leadership.** That may or may not require holding an office of leadership, but it certainly requires learning to be a servant after the example of Christ (Mark 10:45; also Matthew 20:20-28; Philippians 2:7). Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament expectation of God's 'suffering servant' (Isaiah) through giving His life as a ransom for many. Christ's death serves as a powerful corrective to ideas of leadership that are based on visible and immediate success, preservation of power and position, self-justification or self-protection. Leading as servants does not mean that the people we lead are our masters. We serve them under the direction of one Master, God. Christian leaders must serve God's agenda rather than their own or even that of the church or people they lead. They do this through serving sacrificially in humility and love.

Serving like Christ

Not based on:

- preservation of power and position
- visible and immediate success
- self-justification or self-protection

Characterised by:

- humility and sacrifice

³ Banks, Robert, and Bernice M. Ledbetter. 2004. *Reviewing Leadership: A Christian Evaluation of Current Approaches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), p.110

⁴ Hian, Chua Wee. 1987. *Learning to Lead* (Leicester: IVP), p.23

- insight and faithfulness
- vulnerability and love

Service in Scripture

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15)

“all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3)

“Let my people go, so that they may worship (serve) me” (Exodus 4:23 etc.)

“You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6)

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father” (Revelation 1:6; also 5:10)

“The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him” (Revelation 22:3)

“It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:11-12)

New Testament leadership?

The New Testament epistles speak of ‘leadership’ in the church in three senses:

- *People given to the church* (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11)
Christ has given apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to His Church. Note that these are all ‘ministries of the word’ and all are responsible to equip others for ministry (Ephesians 4:12).

- *Functions needed for the health of the church*

Three words describe the function that is needed:

- Leading the way by example and so standing over the church (*hēgeomai* – Hebrews 13: 7, 17).
- Taking responsibility for the church by working hard and keeping it faithful to God’s truth, protecting it from error (*proistēmi* – Romans 12:8; 1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12)
- Setting a direction for the church and helping to organise its affairs (*kubernēsis* – 1 Corinthians 12:28)

All three ideas come together in the most important biblical image of leadership, the shepherd. Elders are expected to be shepherds who lead the way, provide food and protect the flock (Acts 20:28-31; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

The key leadership functions are taking responsibility, setting direction and protecting the sheep.

- *Positions in the churches*

As churches became organised it was necessary to recognise certain people in positions within the church. Three positions are mentioned: elder, overseer, deacon. Character and example is the key qualification for all three along with ability to teach for elders and overseers.

The need in every context and congregation is to identify the people God has given to the church who are able to fulfil the function that is needed in the church (based on the example they already set) and to recognise them in positions within the church. Notice two important themes that run through these three perspectives:

- Faithfulness to the Word of God* – leaders must keep the church true to Scripture
- Example to the people of God* – leaders must keep themselves true to Scripture

It is also important to realise that our translations of Scripture sometimes introduce a distortion to what is said about leadership (presumably because we read our traditions or experiences into Scripture):

- **Romans 12:8** – there is no verb for ‘govern’ (NIV); it simply says that leading should be done with zeal or diligence. Even the word ‘leadership’ or ‘leads’ may be misleading (as the ESV footnotes demonstrate). The word really means to stand out, in the sense of taking responsibility and setting an example.
- **1 Timothy 5:17** – the elders don’t ‘direct the affairs’ (NIV) or ‘rule’ (ESV), they do their work or fulfil their role well (they are outstanding in doing it), setting an example for the church. The word used is the same one as in Romans 12:8. It’s also used in Titus 3:8, 14 to describe being outstanding in (NIV devoted to) doing good.
- **Hebrews 13:17** – there is no word for ‘authority’ in the original. We are actually told to ‘submit to them’ – that is to our leaders. The challenge is to submit and obey in relationship, not because of office or authority.

Leading by example

Lawrence Richards & Clyde Hoeldtke:⁵

Command authority tells others what to do. The leadership mode involves issuing orders, passing on decisions the leader has made. Servants have one role in the household – to serve. Rather than tell, the servant shows. Example, not command, is the primary mode through which the servant leads.

“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ”

(1 Corinthians 11:1)

“set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity”

(1 Timothy 4:12)

“Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, [...] eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock”

(1 Peter 5:2-3)

Authoritative leadership?

Do church leaders have ‘authority’ to lead the church? In one sense the answer is a definite no. All authority was given to the risen Christ (Matthew 28:18) and remains His. He is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18), a term that is never used for any leader. He continues to direct His church through the guidance of His Spirit in faithfulness to the gospel. Even the apostles, like Paul, only had authority insofar as they were faithful to the gospel – authority to build the church up and not to tear it down (2 Corinthians 10:8; 13:10). Authority in the church rests in the Word of God. God exercises His authority among His people through Scripture.

In another sense, however, leaders have authority whenever they are keeping the church faithful to Christ. Titus 2:15 tells Titus to command people to obey ‘what is in accord with sound doctrine’ (v1). This task is shared by the elders Titus is to appoint (1:5-9). In the surrounding chapters we discover that this task includes:

- a) *Gospel truth* (2:11-14; 3:3-7) – holding firmly to the grace of God in Christ Jesus
- b) *Gospel morality* (2:2-10; 3:1-2) – living out the good works that God calls us to in all of life
- c) *Gospel unity* (3:9-11) – living in harmony together as the family of God

The same three concerns are evident in other passages where the church and its leaders are expected to act in discipline to correct problems. These may be to do with denial of gospel truth (1 Timothy 1:18-20), unrepented sin (1 Corinthians 5:1-13), or behaviour that threatens unity (1 Corinthians 11, 14; Philippians 4:2-3).

⁵ Richards, Lawrence O., and Clyde Hoeldtke. 1980. *A Theology of Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan)

Leaders in the church should only command people when one or more of these is at stake. Where it is not an issue of gospel truth, morality, or unity then they should allow freedom. Leaders do not have the right to insist that believers commit to activities or patterns that Scripture does not insist on, unless failure to do so risks division. Where there is fear of division over non-gospel issues there ought to be openness to reconsidering. Leaders must be especially careful not be hasty in preventing believers from doing something that the Lord may be leading them to do or to force them to do something that they have not yet come to a clear conscience about.

Powerless leadership?

Henri Nouwen's book *In the Name of Jesus* (1989, Darton, Longman and Todd) is a powerful reflection on the nature of Christian leadership. In response to a concern that: "*Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead*" (p.60), Nouwen describes the pattern of Christ's leadership and argues that:⁶

Here we touch the most important quality of Christian leadership in the future. It is not a leadership of power and control, but a leadership of powerlessness and humility in which the suffering servant of God, Jesus Christ, is made manifest. [...] I am speaking of a leadership in which power is constantly abandoned in favor of love. It is a true spiritual leadership.

Nouwen's incisive words provide a standard for 'Christian leadership' but also question our own hearts:

- When asserting authority, how much is it biblical leadership and how much is it personal self-assertion?
- When communicating vision, how much is it God-inspired wisdom and how much is it selfish manipulation?
- When organising workers, how much is it equipping the saints and how much is it personal selfish ambition?

We do not 'empower' God's people, we help to set them free to serve God according to His empowering.

Recommendations

- Beware our leadership bias
- Put servanthood above leadership
- Appoint the right people:
 - Servants who are willing to lead
 - Proven character and competence
- Shepherding, not decision-making control:
 - Command only where gospel truth, morality or unity is at stake
 - Set God's people free to serve Him – envision, equip, encourage

What needs to change?

'We cannot be servant-leaders if our position or role or our own attitude tends to lift us above others and makes a distinction between us and the rest of the people of God'

Lawrence Richards & Clyde Hoeldtke⁷

⁶ Nouwen, Henri J.M. 1989. *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (London: DLT), p.63

⁷ Richards, Lawrence O., and Clyde Hoeldtke. 1980. *A Theology of Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan)