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Servant Leaders or Leading Servants?

(Part One)

The term 'servant leadership' has gained immense currency in both Christian and 'secular' leadership circles in recent decades. In the discussion, however, there has been a great deal of cross-fertilization from world to Church and vice versa. This raises two important questions:

1. How much of our practice in Christian leadership is inadvertently modelled after the world's pattern?
2. Is the Church unwittingly allowing woolly language and incorrect thinking to enter its practice and theology of leadership? Serious consequences arise from woolly language – wolves can dress in it to appear as sheep, causing harm to the flock, but worse still, wolves might masquerade as shepherds, feeding themselves on the sheep!

Servant leadership

We need to pay careful attention to the language we use and the concepts we're conveying. Consider the work of Stephen Covey, a Mormon who's one of America's leading thinkers on leadership. He writes:

'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.'¹

The idea of empowerment certainly sounds significant, but notice how Covey describes servant leadership as a strategy to maximise productivity. The leader is primary, and it appears that he's serving the production line, not the people. People are then a resource, 'empowered' to produce a product more rapidly, in greater quantity and for a greater profit. What about the church? Could it be that 'empowerment' of the laity is sometimes nothing more than a strategy for improving the productivity of the machine that is the church?

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Such a possibility should stop us short. Surely, we need to ask ourselves what kind of leaders Christ calls us to be. Perhaps we should first pay attention to the word order. If asked where the concept of 'servant leadership' originated, most Christians

would probably answer, 'from Jesus.' That may be indirectly true, but the phrase was not used by Jesus. It actually originated in the 1970s in the writings of American Quaker author Robert K. Greenleaf? He wasn't writing specifically about Christian leadership, but about leadership more generally. Here's what he wrote:

'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.'²

For Greenleaf, servanthood comes before leadership. Indeed, leadership is simply a means by which to fulfil the desire to serve. This emphasis is laudable,

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and resonates with Jesus' teaching, but Greenleaf's term 'servant leader' might, nonetheless, contribute to our misconceptions. Leadership is the key term, and servant is the qualifier. That seems to be the wrong way round.

Today we don't need more servant leaders but more leading servants.

We need to create an environment where service is celebrated, servants appreciated and servanthood becomes the norm. Out of this setting, then, godly people are called forth to take on the mantle of leadership after the pattern of Christ.

Leading servants

Words for 'servant', 'serve' and 'service' appear around 100 times in the New Testament. Jesus did not, however, say that a Christian leader should serve, but that those who serve will be greatest. Service comes before leadership. The apostles, to

whom Christ was speaking, were to be the nucleus and the foundation of the Church. Yet there is little evidence of them being controlling decision makers – instead they focused on prayer and the ministry (service) of the Word (Acts 7:1-6). As servants of the Word, they protected and guided the Church. The Church needs leadership; no question. **The Church does not, however, need leaders who will serve, but servants willing to fulfil the task of leadership.**

It all starts with learning how to be a servant after the example of Christ (Mark 10:45; also Matt 20:20-28; Phil 2:7). Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament expectation of God's 'suffering servant' (Isaiah) through giving His life as a ransom for many. The ultimate sacrifice, on a Roman cross, stands against worldly views of leadership – success, preservation of power, self-justification and self-protection. Yet leading as servants does not entail role reversal. Our congregations are not our masters. We serve them under the direction of one Master, God. More importantly, this informs our priorities and our loyalty. We serve God's agenda and we do it through serving sacrificially in humility and love. Sometimes this requires us to stand against some of the more robust members of our community. Serving God above all must be our guiding principle.

In Part Two of this article, we'll look at the New Testament model of leadership.



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If you need support, contact our team on support@livingleadership, and we'd be happy to connect you to a service of ours that would help.

Footnotes:

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