



The Christian Leader: Servant and Steward

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Abstract

Secular leadership has failed to deliver. Christian leadership as modelled by Jesus Christ presents an alternative. Contrary to secular leadership, which is characterised by power and dominance, Christian leadership begins with a premise that if one wants to lead, one must first develop a servant's heart. The article explores the twin dimensions of Christian leadership; servant leadership and steward leadership. While the primary role of the servant leader is the wellbeing of the people being led, the steward leader focuses on accomplishing the purpose of the owner. Christian leadership seeks to emulate Jesus the servant Lord, who came not to be served but to serve and to fulfil the mission entrusted to him by his Father.

Keywords

Christian leadership, servant leadership and stewardship.

The crisis of leadership around the world makes one wonder about the real success of the many leadership theories propagated by behavioural scientists. The credibility of institutions has been tainted by serious scandals caused by their leaders. Establishments in all walks of life whether business, political, religious, educational, philanthropic or sport have

been negatively impacted by the decisions and conduct of their leaders.

The failure of secular leadership

Secular leadership has failed to deliver. Status, power, greed, short termism and recklessness have been the driving forces with disastrous consequences. A case in point is the business world, which has witnessed an increasing spate of prominent corporate scandals in the last few years. Global corporations like Enron, World-Com, Arthur Andersen, Lehman brothers and Satyam, were involved in scandals that rocked the financial markets. As a result, the lives and fortunes of millions of employees, investors and innocent people were decimated¹. The 2018 Nirav Modi banking sector scam showed how rules were bent and billions of rupees of public money were siphoned off². The ball tampering scandal by the Australian cricket team in the 3rd test of the 2018 South Africa Test series illustrates that the desire to win at any cost overrides age-old principles of sporting fair play³. These and other examples indicate a philosophy of the end justifying the means. There is clearly a growing trust deficit in secular leadership.

An alternative model

In contrast, Jesus Christ through his parables and actions presents a leadership alternative, which is counter-intuitive to human nature. His model of leadership emphasises that to go up one must go down. Secular leaders crave the trappings of

1 Shah Anup, 2010 Global Financial Crisis, 11 December 2010, <http://www.globalissues.org/article/768/global-financial-crisis>

2 Krishna, Navmi. 2018. "All you need to know about Nirav Modi and the \$1.77-billion PNB fraud" last updated on February 14, 2018 <http://www.thehindu.com/business/Industry/all-you-need-to-know-about-nirav-modi-and-the-177-billion-pnb-fraud/article22753973.ece>

3 Holmes, Tracy. 2018. "Ball-tampering scandal: Cricket Australia under mounting scrutiny over team culture" Last updated on April 1, 2018. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-01/cricket-australia-under-mounting-scrutiny/9608638>

status and power. But Jesus underlines that “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:24 NASB).

Jesus modelled the alternative leadership approach by coming “not to be served but to serve” (Matthew 20:28 NIV), thus focusing on the servant aspect. Jesus was single-minded about achieving his mission and bringing in the Father’s kingdom. He aligned his vision with God’s

“ He stressed stewardship and the need to fulfill the mission entrusted to the leader. ”

will even to death on the cross, demonstrating that his way of leadership is stewardship and entails fulfilling the mission entrusted without counting the cost. Jesus did not teach any techniques but concentrated on the heart and the character that emerges from a servant’s heart. He stressed stewardship and the need to fulfil the mission entrusted to the leader.

This model demonstrated by Jesus is also known as Christian leadership. It necessitates a fundamental paradigm shift, a radically different worldview. Above all, Christian leadership stems from a personal encounter and an intimate relationship with Christ. Everything else follows from that relationship and the exhortation to imitate Christ.

In Philippians 2:3-8, St Paul exhorts Christians to follow the model set by Christ. “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death-

even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:3-8 NIV)

Christ himself took on the nature of a servant and humbled himself even to death on the cross. His heart was fixed on fulfilling his mission even if it meant giving up his very life for it.

Christian leadership vs. Secular leadership

Jesus expected his followers to exhibit a leadership, which is in sharp contrast to secular leadership. Christian leadership starts with the presumption that to lead one must first have a servant's heart and if one desires to be great one must become a slave. On the other hand, secular leadership measures greatness by status, power, position, the size of an organisation one leads and how many people run to do the bidding of the leader. Jesus had a different idea of leadership and reiterated on various occasions that his followers must be different and must serve those they wish to lead. Moreover, unlike the leaders in the world who encounter pressures to make decisions with an eye on immediate results, Jesus' horizon was eternity.

Hence in his way of leading, decisions were to be made based on whether they were right or wrong and not on whether they were the most profitable. Power is to be used for self-gain or to promote short-term results in the secular model, however Christian leadership accentuates empathy and the ethical use of power. The Christian Leader's struggle is to do the right thing with a servant's heart, holding all things in stewardship for God the owner

Table 1: Secular versus Christian Leadership

Secular leadership	Christian leadership
To go up, one must push others down	To go up, one must go down
Characterized by dominance	Characterized by service
Grabs power	Shares power
Based on control, status, authority, competitiveness	Based on humility, collaboration, empathy, stewardship
Time frame: short term	Time frame: eternity
Focus on comfort and elimination of pain for self	Suffering is key - self-denial even to the point of death
Powerful leadership with all the outward trappings of power – stems from position and role	Meek leadership but not weak leadership- stems from an internal strength and connection with Jesus and the Holy Spirit
Do the profitable thing	Do the right thing
Focus is on self-growth and performance	Focus is on the growth and performance of those served
Builds own kingdom and reputation	Builds God's kingdom

The two sides of Christian leadership

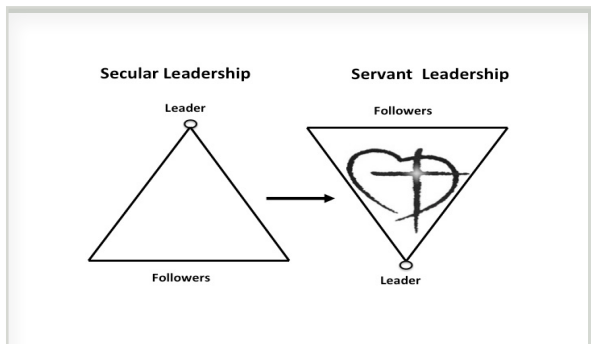
Although Christian leadership has been associated with servant leadership, it has another dimension. Servant leadership is oriented towards the welfare of its followers. But the leader has responsibilities toward the owner and towards the organisation he serves. Therefore, Christian leadership is also stewardship where the steward is a trustee who is accountable to the owner/stakeholder for the fulfilment of the mission. Thus, Christian leadership is like a coin with two faces: on one face is servanthood and on the other stewardship. One cannot exist without the other and both are complementary. The Christian leader must thus be, both servant and steward.

Jesus demonstrated servant leadership when he washed his apostles' feet. He likewise demonstrated stewardship when he went about furthering his Father's mission and revealing the Father's heart to his people. This attention to the mission was exemplified by his determined journey to Calvary and his death

on the cross ending with his triumphant cry ‘It is finished’ (John 19:30). While servanthood is an attitude of the heart, stewardship is more about competence. Christian leaders need to manage the operation on behalf of the owner efficiently and effectively so that the mission and vision of the owner are realised.

St Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:1(NIV) defines Christian leaders as both servants and stewards. “This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.” St Paul calls himself and Apollos “stewards” who have been entrusted with the “mysteries of God.” A steward is someone who has been entrusted with a task or a commission. Some illustrations of stewardship include a manager of a tea estate or coffee plantation, or a CEO of a company who must run the business profitably, or a Fund manager who invests his clients’ money and must ensure a return on investment or profit. As “servants”, they must above all seek to serve Christ and work for his honour and glory alone. Both as a steward and servant the leader is subordinate to his master and is accountable to him.

1 Peter 4:10 “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. (NIV)” In this scripture text, St. Peter once again defines leadership as a combination of servanthood and stewardship. He further elaborates that no matter what gifts we have received, they are meant to be used to serve others.



In doing so we shall be faithful stewards of God's grace.

In one of his parables in Luke's Gospel, Jesus stresses that a steward who is put in charge of his servants must be both faithful and sensible in discharging his duties. "And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes" (Luke 12:42-43 NASB)." Thus, the steward who is in charge must himself be a slave, going beyond the concept of servanthood.

The Christian Leader as servant

A leader being a servant is radically different to the common conception of leadership. In most circles, everyone fusses over leaders and aims to please them by serving them. Leadership is perceived as a position of exaltation, power and strength while being a servant is seen to be inferior and a symbol of weakness. In an ambitious, self-promoting, competitive environment where only the fittest survive, servant leadership stands in stark contrast. Servant leadership is both paradoxical and revolutionary because normally leaders don't serve and servants don't lead.

Although the concept is over 2000 years old, Robert K. Greenleaf in his essay "The Servant as Leader"⁴ coined the term 'Servant Leadership'. Greenleaf defined it as follows: "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."

The primary focus of a servant leader is on the growth and well-being of people. This is quite in contrast to a traditional leadership model. The conventional model has the leader at the

4 Greenleaf, Robert. 1970; The Servant as Leader

top of a pyramid with accompanying concentration of status and power. Opposed to that is the servant leadership model shaped like an inverted pyramid with the community being served at the top and the leader at the bottom. The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform. Greenleaf proposed that service ought to be the distinguishing characteristic of leadership. The servant leader uses his power to serve the people and achieve the goals of the organisation. Throughout the gospel, the message of Jesus is consistent: "...if anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35 NIV).

Mark 10:35-45, details an interesting quest for leadership positions based on power and status. James and John, part of the inner circle of Jesus for over three years, tried to obtain a guarantee from Jesus that he would give them positions of power to sit on his right and left when he came into his messianic kingdom. The twelve were furious when they heard of the brothers' bid to outmanoeuvre them in prominence. In response Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of 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 NIV).

Clearly the disciples understood leadership based on the prevailing Roman socio-political situation. Jesus corrects their understanding by showing them that they must be radically different from such worldly leaders who terrorise and exercise power over their followers. Using control and coercion, they retain their privileges and supremacy. Jesus expected his disciples to be servants (Greek: *diakonos* - one who waits on tables) and goes even further exhorting them to be slaves (Greek: *doulos* - even humbler than *diakonos*)⁵.

⁵ Brown, Fitzmyer, Murphy 1968. The New Jerome Biblical Commentary 49: 67

In another incident Jesus modelled service and showed that his disciples were to display other-centered leadership. He asks “For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves. (Luke 22:27 NASB)

Without a serving heart it is almost impossible to become a servant leader. Servant leadership isn’t an option; it’s a mandate. Servant leadership is to be a living statement of who we are in Christ, how we treat one another, and how we demonstrate the love of Christ to the whole world.

The incident of the Passover meal as narrated in the gospel of John chapter 13:4-17 (NIV) contains insights into Christian leadership. Jesus and his apostles had to use a borrowed room for the Passover meal and it most probably came without a foot washing service. Foot washing was customarily done by a slave when

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Now that I your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you should also wash one another’s feet. ”

welcoming a dignitary to the house and was the basic sign of hospitality (cfr Gen18:4, 1Sam 25:41). Despite being with Jesus for three and a half years, none of his apostles were about to volunteer. Therefore, Jesus their leader got up from the table to wash and wipe the feet of his followers (John 13:4-5 NIV). Despite some resistance from Peter who recognised that Jesus was his superior and this was the duty of a slave, Jesus finished and asked them, “Do you understand what I have done for you?” (John13:12 NIV). When there was no answer, Jesus clarified “You call me “Teacher” and “Lord,” and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them”

(John 13:13–17NIV).

In other words, Jesus showed them by demonstration that he expects his followers to lead just like him by becoming a servant and washing the feet of those they lead. In his epistles St Peter repeatedly highlights the key attributes of humility, leading by example and not dominating followers. In 1 Peter 5:3, he states “Not lording it over those entrusted to you but being examples to the flock” and again in verse 5b “All of you clothe yourself with humility towards one another (NIV).

The marks of a servant leader

Servant leadership emphasises collaboration, empathy, trust, and the ethical use of power. Larry Spears,⁶ President and CEO of ‘The Greenleaf Centre for Leadership’, synthesized 10 central characteristics of servant leaders from Greenleaf’s writings:

Listening: The servant leader needs to develop the skill of intent listening to what is being said as well as what is left unsaid. He/she must spend time listening to and reflecting on the leading of God in his inner being.

Empathy: He/she must strive to understand and empathise with people, without condoning behaviour or performance.

Healing: The ability to be sensitive can empower servant leaders to bring wholeness to people whose spirits are broken or are dealing with emotional hurts.

Awareness: A servant leader needs to develop the ability to be self-aware especially of motives and ethics.

Persuasion: The ability to convince people and build consensus is very useful to get the commitment of the whole team to a course of action.

Conceptualization: The ability to see the big picture and think beyond day to day realities.

⁶ Spears, 2005. Understanding and practice of servant leadership Servant leadership Research roundtable. School of leadership studies Regent university

Foresight: He/she must have the ability to foresee the likely outcome of a situation and rely on intuition.

Stewardship: Is defined by Greenleaf as the primary commitment to serving the needs of others

Commitment to the Growth of People: The servant-leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything within his or her power to nurture the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of employees.

Building Community: The servant leader works to build community in the institution/workplace.

Table 2:10

Characteristics of a Servant Leader (Spears 2005)

1.	Listenening intently beyond words
2.	Accepting others being empathetic
3.	Foresight and intuition
4.	Awareness and perception
5.	Persuasion skills
6.	Conceptual ability
7.	Healing influence
8.	Building community in the workplace
9.	Practicing the art of contemplation
10	Ability to communicate concepts clearly

The Christian leader as steward

Christian leadership is stewardship. It is holding something in trust and not owning it. Whether money, position or talents, stewardship is a trust and the steward is merely a manager of what is entrusted to him. Peter Block⁷ defines stewardship as

7 Block, Peter.2013. Stewardship: Choosing service over self-

“holding something in trust for another.”

A steward in the ancient world was a person who was given the responsibility and authority to rule over the affairs of the household. Joseph was promoted to be a steward over Potiphar's household: he managed everything in the household and was given the authority to rule over the house (Gen. 39:1–6a). In that role, he was responsible to manage the household well; he was not to waste the resources of the family but to make wise decisions.

To be successful, a steward must be found faithful. In the scripture text of 1 Corinthians 4:2, St Paul states “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (NIV). If a steward is managing a coffee plantation he must turn over a profit. If he is managing a fund for investors he must ensure growth of the money held in trust. In other

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Now it is required
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words, his efforts must bear fruit. Again, in 1 Corinthians 4:6 (NIV) St Paul reiterates, “Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself

and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written.” Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other.” The proper attitude of a leader should be this is owned by God, I am here to serve for a while and I must do my best to further the mission of the organisation// task I am doing.

Stewardship is trust not a possession

The parable of the talents (Mathew 25) is truly a parable of stewardship. Before a man goes on a journey, he entrusts his property to his servants, according to their ability. To one he

interest. California: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

gives five talents, to another two talents, and to another one talent. Talents were coins representing sizable sums of money estimated at being over 15 years of wages for a labourer. A point to be noted was that the man did not transfer the ownership of the talents to his subordinates. Instead he gave it to them in trust. Stewardship is a trust not a possession. The quantum of talents distributed was proportionate to the abilities of his servants.

Stewardship is managing not owning

The servants were expected to manage the talents with the owner's best interests in mind. Matthew 25:16-18 says, "Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. But he who received the one talent went away, and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money."

The first two servants managed the talents well and doubled them. They were concerned about the owner's interests or in modern day terminology the 'stakeholder's' interests. In contrast, the third servant hid the talent out of fear. Perhaps he lacked the competence to manage the resources keeping the owners interest in mind.

Stewardship is a call to be faithful not operate out of fear

After a long time, the master returned to settle accounts with his servants. To the first two servants who doubled his money, the master said, "Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master" (Mt: 21, 23). But the third servant did not fare so well. He said: "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no *seed*. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours." (Mt: 24-25 NIV)

Because the third servant operated out of fear, he made excuses and took the safe path. As a result, he was deemed a wicked lazy slave and even the one talent he had was taken away from him. However, the master affirmed the first two servants for their faithfulness and said, “You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things” (Mt 25:23 NIV). Steward Leadership is not so much about our ability to lead as much as about our ability to be faithful to the interests of the owner/stakeholders.

The marks of stewardship

1. Is faithful to the mission

A steward leader keeps his eyes on the mission entrusted to him. He can create a compelling vision of something bigger that others will embrace. Despite the hurdles that come in the way of attaining that vision, a leader strives forward.

2. Personal relationship with God

Like Jesus, a Christian leader must make his walk with God a priority. Jesus stayed connected to God daily and despite his hectic schedule made time to stay aligned with God's will. He prayed before important decisions and after successful ministry. He prayed early in the morning and late at night. Prayer was his lifeline with God. To remain focused on the mission a Christian leader needs to hear from God, to stay aligned to his will and to discern what God wants for the leadership situation.

3. Prioritises tasks

Time is one resource that a leader never has enough of especially with all the incessant demands that clamour for his attention. Prioritization is a key skill the leader needs to develop. Focusing on important tasks will enable the leader to be proactive rather than reactive.

4. Delegates Authority

All resources including people are gifts from God. Developing the team and delegating authority to ensure followers grow is a

vital contribution of a steward leader. Jesus himself spent time in developing his team and delegated authority to them. As part of their training he sent them out to minister to the surrounding villages in pairs and later delegated his mission to them.

5. Manages money

Whether personal or organisational finances, a steward holds and spends money in trust for God. Diligence and wisdom in managing money are key requirements of a steward leader.

6. Demands accountability

A steward leader holds himself as well as his team accountable for results. While speaking truth in love is key, clarifying expectations and responsibilities and upholding those standards are important roles of a Christian leader.

Conclusion

Leadership as modelled by Jesus is an oxymoron in the modern world, which is used to a more command and control structure. Christian leadership emerges from a personal relationship with Christ and from the values of the Gospel. While secular leadership is about exercising authority, the leadership of Jesus is about service to one's followers and stewardship of the mission entrusted to each one by God.

As servants we emulate Jesus the servant Lord, who came not to be served but to serve and who modelled servant leadership by washing the apostles' feet. The Christian leader is motivated first to serve and then to lead. He uses the power of the leader to serve the people and accomplish the mission of the owner. A steward is a servant entrusted with a commission. He must be found faithful and is accountable to God and his organisation for its accomplishment. The Christian leader is called to be a servant and a steward.

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