

## Dialogue I

### Stewardship-Leadership: A Biblical Refinement of Servant-Leadership

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*Servant-leadership is a popular leadership approach that is promoted in secular and sacred writings on leadership theory. This paper reviews the current thought on servant-leadership, questions whether servant-leadership is a sufficiently unique approach to leadership to warrant thinking of it as a “biblical” approach to leadership, and offers a revision of the theory which might bring the theory into better alignment with the Scriptures.*

#### Introduction

Today, servant-leadership has been the leadership theory that has been most embraced by Christians as a model for Christian leadership both in and out of the church. A simple Internet search on the topic of servant-leadership will yield multiple sites, secular and sacred, which recommend the virtues of servant-leadership. Many who write and teach on this topic apparently propose that servant-leadership is a biblically-based model and is therefore the only appropriate model for Christians to employ as they seek to apply their faith in their God-given roles as managers and leaders.

Though it may not be taught as “the” biblical model for Christian leadership, within Christendom, and on some Christian college campuses, servant-leadership is being taught as the best model of leadership for the Christian. Reasons as to why this theory is acceptable as a biblical model range from those who advocate this theory as being derived from the Scriptures to those who see it as the best alternative of the available theories: a theory that is not inconsistent with the Scriptures and which incorporates some of Jesus’ teaching on service. Yet, is this a reasonable conclusion? Is servant-leadership theory, as

currently conceptualized, a truly biblical model, or does it need some refinement?

The purpose of this paper is to examine servant-leadership and to propose an extension that would bring the theory into better alignment with the Scriptures. First, in order to gain a context for the theory of servant-leadership, I will begin with a short review of servant-leadership theory development. Second, I will point out how some aspects of the theory prevent it from being thoroughly “biblical.” And last, I will offer some suggestions for a more refined formulation of leadership that is consistent with the Scriptures.

### **What is Servant-Leadership?** *Seminal Writing on Servant-Leadership*

Any analysis of servant-leadership must start with the work of Robert Greenleaf, whose seminal work, *Servant-Leadership*, stands as the fount of servant-leadership theory (this work is a more fully developed exposition of the thoughts that were originally published in a 1970 essay by him called “The Servant as Leader”). In *Servant-Leadership*, Greenleaf writes that the genesis of the idea of the servant-leader came to him

in an “intuitive insight” (1977, p. 12) as he reflected upon Hermann Hess’ book *Journey to the East*.

Greenleaf recounts that in Hess’ story, a servant, Leo, does menial tasks for a group on a spiritual journey to the East; along the way, Leo disappears and the group falls into disarray. Later, the narrator is taken into the spiritual Order that the group had sought and there discovers that Leo, all the while, was the head of the Order. Greenleaf uses this story to illustrate his central contention regarding servant-leadership: the servant-leader is servant first and leader second. He suggested that there was a difference between those who followed a leader-first model and those who followed a servant-first model, though these two models represented two extreme types with shadings along the continuum. Greenleaf proposed that the difference between the two “manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and most difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become

servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?” (Greenleaf, 1977, pp. 13-14, emphasis his).

In addition to defining a servant-leader as being one who is a servant first, Greenleaf goes on to give several other characteristics of servant-leaders. According to him, servant-leaders are able to listen and understand, they are able to withdraw and reorient themselves, they can accept and empathize, they know the unknowable, and they exercise foresight.

Larry Spears, the executive director of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center and the bearer of Greenleaf’s mantle, says that servant-leadership is “a model that puts serving others—including employees, customers, and community—as the number one priority. Servant-leadership emphasizes increased service to others, a holistic approach to work, promoting a sense of commitment, and the sharing of power in decision making” (Spears, 1998).

### *Secular and Syncretistic Approaches to Servant-Leadership: A Sampling*

Various other authors have refined and added to Greenleaf’s

conceptualization and/or adopted parts of the servant-leadership model into their own conceptual frameworks. For some, like Stephen R. Covey and Peter Senge, servant-leadership has become a significant influence and often becomes a part of their framework, though it may not be the central theme; others have made servant-leadership a more central component of their theorizing (e.g., Block, 1993).

Max DePree, the chairman of Herman Miller and an author in the field of servant-leadership theory, writes in his book *Leadership Jazz* that there are 12 characteristics that are keys to being a successful servant-leader: 1) integrity, 2) vulnerability, 3) discernment, 4) awareness of the human spirit, 5) courage in relationships, 6) sense of humor, 7) intellectual energy and curiosity, 8) respect for the future, regard for the present, understanding of the past, 9) predictability, 10) breadth, 11) comfort with ambiguity, and 12) presence.

In a similar vein, Peter Block has popularized the idea of stewardship-leadership. Basically, though, the concept is a re-packaging of the essentials of servant-leadership and of Block’s own ideas about what constitutes

servant-leadership. In his book *Stewardship: Choosing Service Over Self Interest*, Block says that stewardship begins with “the willingness to be accountable for some larger body than ourselves—an organization, a community” and that it involves choosing empowerment over dependency and choosing service over self-interest (Block, 1993).

### **Christian Approaches to Servant-Leadership**

Myron Rush advocates a biblical philosophy of management which is nearly indistinguishable from servant-leadership, but is unique in that his approach clearly grounds servant-leadership (or management) in the Scriptures. He clearly believes that the Bible has a different and distinct view of the nature of the perspective of the leader, and he states that the “starting point in adopting a biblical approach to management is recognizing the vast difference between the world’s philosophy of management and the Bible’s philosophy of management” (Rush, 1990, p. 50).

Rush goes on to use Matthew 20:20-28<sup>1</sup> to illustrate his point. He points out that the world’s approach to management is to use power over others, and he cites

the traditional definition of management<sup>2</sup> as proof of the world’s perspective; he then goes further and proposes that this exchange between Jesus and his disciples introduces a “new philosophy of leadership and management.” Rush writes, “All other biblical principles relating to management simply expand on, or illustrate in action, the principles and philosophy of leadership and management being taught by Jesus Christ in this passage” (Rush, 1990, p. 52). Though he acknowledges that this is a very difficult passage to apply, he says that the difficulty does not excuse us from the necessity of applying it. And he further explicates the principles by writing:

*Therefore, the biblical approach to management, based on the principles presented by Jesus in Matthew 20:20-28, can be defined as “serving the needs of others as they work at accomplishing their jobs.” There is a vast difference between the biblical approach to management and the secular approach. Earlier in the chapter, the secular definition of management was given as “getting work done through others.” ... In the secular model*

*of management, power usually serves the manager. In the biblical model, however, the manager uses his or her power to serve the needs of others* (Rush, 1990, p. 53).

Recently, Tucker, Stone, Russell, and Fraz have entered the Christian stream of servant-leadership and propose that “leader visibility” is an important moderating variable that affects the quality of servant-leadership. In their review of the literature on servant-leadership, they indicated that the servant-

***Matthew 20:20-28 ... introduces a “new philosophy of leadership and management.”***

leadership model has eight functional attributes: vision, credibility, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciation of others, and empowerment (Tucker et al., 2000).

From my review of the literature, it appears that the central tenet of servant-leadership is that the leader serves those around him and that this perspective and implementation represents an inversion of the traditional hierarchy where leaders are served by their followers. Though different

authors may suggest various functional attributes, the central distinguishing characteristic of this model is the motivation for leadership. The servant-leader model differs from other models of leadership because it emphasizes that the servant-leader is servant-first, while other leadership models address leadership from a leader-first perspective. Although different authors may emphasize different elements and component parts of implementation and characterization, there does seem to be agreement over this point. Greenleaf

himself suggests that the crucial difference undergirding his model is revealed “in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and the most difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons?” (Spears, 1998, p. 19). Yet the question remains whether this central tenet is sufficiently distinct for us to claim that servant-leadership is a “biblical” model for leadership.

### **Difficulties for Servant-Leadership as “the” Biblical Model**

The first problem for servant-leadership is that there is nothing that is distinctly biblical about it. Problematically, though, it appears as a seemingly “spiritual”<sup>3</sup> approach to leadership; the concept as it is currently conceptualized is not clearly biblical. The theory itself can be accepted and practiced by Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and atheists alike. This is true for both the secularized versions of servant-leadership and for the “sacred” versions as well. There is nothing in the theory that would cause those who do not accept the Bible as their authority to pause and to question whether they could rightly apply the theory. At best, the Christian approach to servant-leadership grounds itself in the example of Christ and in a few of his lessons on service, but that does not make the theory distinctly Christian and/or distinctly biblical. The fact that an atheist could embrace and apply servant-leadership ought to cause Christian authors and educators to pause before they assert that it is a truly biblical model of leadership.

Secondly, servant-leadership has an implementation problem.

How is one to determine which constituency one will serve at any given time? Theorists tell us that we are to serve our superiors, our customers, our peers, and our subordinates (we may go even further and expand this to include all stakeholders including stockholders and the public at large), but they do not adequately address that this presents an intractable problem. Virtually any decision that is made to serve one stakeholder necessitates that the manager/leader is not serving another stakeholder. If a manager decides to serve his employees by paying them more, he must either charge his customers more or pay the stockholders less, therefore failing in serving those stakeholders.

Thirdly, a reading of the literature on servant-leadership might have one suppose that the servant-leader ought not exercise authority or, if he does, it ought to be carefully and sparingly exercised. Allied to this idea, there appears to be an implication in the literature that the right to exercise authority is earned through the service of the leader. Yet, if we take Christ as our supreme example of servant-leadership, we must conclude that both of these implications are incorrect. Christ exercised

authority,<sup>4</sup> taught with authority,<sup>5</sup> and even delegated authority,<sup>6</sup> and certainly we must never be trapped into saying that Christ “earned” our submission and his right to exercise authority by his service.

Lastly, and most importantly, the sacred version of servant-leadership has a problem when, and if, it asserts that the element of Christ’s leadership that made him distinct was his emphasis on the service of humankind. The perspective of the service of others was a distinguishing characteristic of Christ’s lessons on leadership and of His example of leadership, but it was not the only characteristic of his leadership. It is a mistake to assert that Jesus was merely a servant and that He was “one whose very incarnation had *the* purpose of serving humankind” (Tucker et al., 2000, italics mine). The motivation to leadership is but one element regarding the nature of leadership and but one aspect of leadership illustrated and taught in the life of Christ. For instance, those who write on the Matthew 20 passage point out that Jesus changes the motivation for leadership from selfish ambition to “service,”<sup>7</sup> but often fail to adequately emphasize that Jesus was dealing specifically

with the disciples’ ambition for position.

As was the habit of Christ, He brought people to consider internal issues rather than mere external facades. The service element of Christ’s mission and of His example is but one element of all that He was and is, and to make it the preeminent tenet is to err.<sup>8</sup> Most fail to note that Jesus does not condemn their desire for leadership positions; instead He redefines the motive for achieving those positions. Christ did not condemn leadership; He redeemed it so that it should be marked by ambition that is redeemed, redirected, and self-sacrificing (Lawrence, 1987). A holistic approach to the life of Christ and a careful consideration of the contexts of His teaching on leadership ought to temper us and make us more cautious about asserting that service was the most important aspect of Christ’s mission and His approach to leadership.

### **Refining Servant-Leadership Terminology**

Let me suggest that those who would desire to teach biblically-based leadership theory ought to adopt a new terminology and a new perspective in order to distinguish a biblical approach

from the secular approach. In order to distinguish a biblically-based model, I recommend that we refer to it as stewardship-leadership<sup>9</sup> rather than service-leadership. This has the advantage of maintaining a clear distinction between models that are “spiritual” but not biblical and sets it apart from other syncretistic and secular perspectives.

The term *stewardship* also more accurately reflects a balanced biblical perspective

regarding leadership than does the term service-leadership. A steward

is one who manages another’s affairs (Webster, 1968). Often he is in charge of material goods, but he does not own those goods and so he is accountable to another for his actions. In biblical terms, he is one entrusted by God with spiritual authority and responsibility and is thus responsible to God for how he discharges those duties. Once we have completed an extension of the model of servant-leadership we will see that stewardship is the best designation for a biblical model of leadership.

### ***A Biblical Perspective***

As I have noted, leading from the motivation of service to others appears to be the central tenet of service-leadership, and yet this is an inadequate distinction and does not reflect accurately the mission and motivation of Christ. Those who write from a biblical perspective point to Him as the prototypical servant-leader; they refer to His example when He washed the disciples’ feet and to His instruction that “whoever wishes to be first among you shall

be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to


give his life a ransom for many.” Yet, can we conclude from this instruction and his example that the primary “motivation” for Christ was the service of others? We cannot, and, in fact, we must not. What was Christ’s primary motivation? Was it not service to God and a desire for His glory rather than service to mankind? This is a crucial distinction for a biblically-based theory of leadership. Clearly a biblically-based leadership theory must have at its heart a different motivation from the world’s,

and it must incorporate Christ’s instructions on service, but it must not make service to others the core perspective. Rather, a biblical view must make service to God its distinctive characteristic. Fundamentally Christ submitted Himself to His Father and served Him and lived for the glory of His Father. Christ’s service to man was derived from this foundational motivation so that He served man as He fulfilled His mission to glorify His Father. Christ’s service, His laying down of His life, was an activity that was derived from the primary motivation of submission to His Father and His desire to glorify Him. Was service to man through His redemptive work important? Of course, but service to man was not the fundamental and foundational perspective which gave rise to His actions. Sacred and secular service-leadership authors err when they take that which is secondary and derived and make it primary and fundamental. By focusing on one element of the life of Christ and only a few statements, they unfortunately promote an unbalanced view of what it means to have a biblically-based theory of leadership.

### ***Biblical Evidence***

This perspective is more consistent with the full testimony of both the Old and New Testaments and is reflected in a unique title which God gave to the most prominent servant-leaders of the Bible. Moses, himself a great servant-leader and a type of Christ, was called the “servant of the Lord.”<sup>10</sup> Joshua, another type, also shared this designation,<sup>11</sup> as did David.<sup>12</sup> None of these leaders would have seen themselves as servants of the people first or foremost. Often overlooked is that Christ had the designation as “servant” even before his birth, and, while he is not called literally “the servant of the Lord,” the clear inference is there. In Isaiah 53:11, in a Messianic prophesy where the Lord is speaking, Christ is referred to as “My Servant,”<sup>13</sup> thus, arguably, the first reference of Christ’s service has the perspective of service to God first.

This view of Christ as servant to God first also is found in the New Testament. Peter and John, when they were released from prison, lifted their voices in prayer and referred to Jesus as God’s holy servant.<sup>14</sup> Christ Himself had the perspective that He was God’s servant and under



***... a biblical view [of leadership] must make service to God its distinctive characteristic.***

God's authority. Consider Matthew 8:5-13:

*5 And when He had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, entreating Him, 6 and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, suffering great pain." 7 And He said to him, "I will come and heal him." 8 But the centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. 9 For I, too, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it." 10 Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled and said to those who were following, "Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. 11 And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven; 12 but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." 13 And Jesus said to the centurion, "Go your way; let it be done to you as you have believed." And the servant was healed that very hour.*

Why is it that Christ marveled at the man's faith? What was it that this centurion understood about Christ that those in Israel had missed? The key is in the centurion's comment regarding authority. He rightly understood that Jesus, like him, was under authority and, he rightly concluded, that this relationship granted to Jesus authority, just as his position and relationship to the Roman authorities granted him authority over others. Clearly, Jesus approved of this man's understanding of Christ's own authority. In this passage, we have the exercise of Christ's authority (not empowering others to do so), and we have His submission to His Father. Both elements, submission and authority, are combined in a marvelous teaching by the Lord Jesus.

Consider also the perspective of Christ that is revealed in John 17:1-5:

*1 These things Jesus spoke; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, 2 even as You gave Him authority over all mankind, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. 3 And this is eternal*

*life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. 4 I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do. 5 And now, glorify Me together with Yourself, Father, with the glory which I had with You before the world was."*

Here we see again that the preeminent concern of Christ was the glory of His Father, and we also see that He recognized that He Himself had a derived authority over all mankind, an authority that He exercised through His redemptive work on the cross.

### Conclusions

Does this change in perspective help with some of the difficulties that face the servant-leadership model? Yes. First, by making service to God as the central tenet (rather than service to mankind), we restore some unique biblical content to the leadership model that would challenge those who do not acknowledge the Bible as their authority, and we put a barrier up for those who would seek a more syncretistic approach. Second, we partially resolve the implementation problem. Once God is central to the theory,

we are free to make decisions based on responsibility to him. We are not faced with serving multiple competing constituencies which are equally deserving of service; instead we serve one constituency, and that is God. Third, authority is rightfully and appropriately exercised without guilt, because it is an authority that is exercised in the context of submission to a higher authority. We are stewards who are under authority and who exercise authority. Last, restoring the centrality of service to God, we gain a more biblical perspective on leadership and, specifically, the motivation to leadership. We recognize that service to man is important, but it is important as a derived value and motivation. Instead of man, and the service of man, being the center of the theory, God is restored to his proper place: preeminent in all things and central to His creation and all the creature's activities.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Matthew 20:20 "Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Him with her sons, bowing down, and making a request of Him. 21 And He said to her, 'What do you wish?' She said to Him, 'Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left.' 22 But Jesus answered and said, 'You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?' They said to Him, 'We are able.' 23 He said to them, 'My

cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father.’<sup>24</sup> And hearing this, the ten became indignant with the two brothers.<sup>25</sup> But Jesus called them to Himself, and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. <sup>26</sup> It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, <sup>27</sup> and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; <sup>28</sup> just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.’”<sup>2</sup>The traditional definition is “getting work done through others.”<sup>3</sup>One should remember that Greenleaf was a Quaker and a mystic. Both of these influences come through in the current ideas of servant-leadership. Quakers have a unique church government structure which is egalitarian—they do not have elders, deacons, pastors, or priests. As a mystic, Greenleaf spent a fair amount of time under the influence of Jungian therapy, maintaining a dream journal which included an encounter with a “pesky squirrel” that promised him that he would create a “great work” (Spears, 1996). Greenleaf himself considered servant-leadership to be his great work.<sup>4</sup>John 2:14 “And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the moneychangers seated. <sup>15</sup> And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the moneychangers, and overturned their tables; <sup>16</sup> and to those who were selling the doves He said, ‘Take these things away; stop making My Father’s house a house of merchandise.’ <sup>17</sup> His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘ZEAL FOR YOUR HOUSE WILL CONSUME ME.’ <sup>18</sup> The Jews therefore answered and said to Him, ‘What sign do You show to us, seeing that you do these things?’” Matthew 9:1 “And getting into a boat, He crossed over, and came to His own city. <sup>2</sup> And behold, they were bringing to Him a paralytic, lying on a bed; And Jesus, seeing their faith, said to the paralytic, ‘Take courage, my son; your sins are forgiven.’ <sup>3</sup> And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, ‘This fellow blasphemes.’ <sup>4</sup> And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, ‘Why are you thinking evil in

your hearts? <sup>5</sup> For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, and walk’? <sup>6</sup> But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—then He said to the paralytic— ‘Rise, take up your bed, and go home.’ <sup>7</sup> And he rose, and went home. <sup>8</sup> But when the multitudes saw this, they were filled with awe, and glorified God, who had given such authority to men.”<sup>5</sup>Mark 1:21 “And filled with awe they went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and began to teach. <sup>22</sup> And they were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup> And just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, <sup>24</sup> saying, ‘What do we have to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!’ <sup>25</sup> And Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be quiet, and come out of him!’ <sup>26</sup> Throwing him into convulsions, the unclean spirit cried out with a loud voice, and came out of him. <sup>27</sup> And they were all amazed, so that they debated among themselves, saying, ‘What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.’”<sup>6</sup>Matthew 10:1 “And having summoned His twelve disciples, He gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness.”<sup>7</sup>I place “service” in quotation marks because I plan to add some essential biblical content that is not present in the current formulations.<sup>8</sup>I hasten to add that it is an extremely important and central issue, perhaps even the most important, but to write as though it is the only element is an unbalanced approach.<sup>9</sup>Or perhaps merely the biblical term “stewardship.”<sup>10</sup>See Dt. 34:5; Joshua 1:1, 13, 15; 8:31; 11:12; 12:6; 13:8; 18:7; 22:2f  
<sup>11</sup>Joshua 24:29; Judges 2:8  
<sup>12</sup>Psalms 18:1; Psalms 36:1  
<sup>13</sup>Isaiah 53:11 “As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, As He will bear their iniquities. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, And He will divide the booty with the strong; Because He poured

out Himself to death, And was numbered with the transgressors; Yet He Himself bore the sin of many, And interceded for the transgressors.”<sup>14</sup>Acts 4:27, 30. It is perhaps significant that they did not refer to Christ as the servant of mankind. In fact I can think of no instance where Christ indicates that he came as mankind’s servant. He came as God’s servant and as such served mankind.

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