

Dialogue I

A Response to “Stewardship-Leadership: A Biblical Refinement of Servant-Leadership”

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Introduction

Beadles’ purpose in writing *Stewardship-Leadership: A Biblical Refinement of Servant-Leadership* is to “examine servant-leadership and to propose an extension that would bring the theory into better alignment with the Scriptures” (Beadles, 2000). I wholeheartedly concur that this void needs addressing. Though the topic of servant-leadership has seemingly been discussed and rehashed sufficiently, it still is an enigma warranting further examination. In addition, the present understanding of servant-leadership, particularly in respect to Christians, needs development.

Beadles’ four concerns regarding the current ideology of servant-leadership are: (1) it is too inclusive,¹ (2) implementation is too difficult,² (3) authority is exercised too infrequently,³ and (4) God is not the first priority.⁴ Beadles contends that *servant-leadership* should become *stewardship-leadership*, via

exercising authority more (i.e., serving less) and placing *service to God*, rather than *service to humankind*, as the central tenant. In so doing, he postulates that his four concerns will be alleviated.

Beadles’ observations are useful, thought-provoking, and insightful. However, his four concerns are not obvious and are arguably unfounded. Further, the solution that Beadles proposes may have an undesirable outcome and create additional problems. This rejoinder will address and challenge the legitimacy of Beadles’ four concerns as well as his intended solution and its impact on the four concerns. In addition, alternate biblical refinements to servant-leadership are offered.

Widespread Acceptance

The fact that servant-leadership is practiced by non-Christians (as well as Christians) should not necessarily constitute it as unbiblical.⁵ True, Christians

are promised that many of their thoughts and actions will be misunderstood or rejected and that they must readily accept insult and persecution (Matthew 5:11-12). However, biblical concepts need not always be divisive. Many tenants of Christianity, including loving one’s neighbor (Matthew 5:43), respecting family (Exodus 20:12), life being sacred (Exodus 20:13), and not taking from others (Exodus 20:15) are embraced by most predominant religions, as well as agnosticism and atheism. So, too, the precepts of servant-leadership (e.g., listening, understanding, accepting, service)⁶ are biblical yet appeal to religions and beliefs other than Christianity. In fact, given that God has created everything and is master of its functioning,⁷ it could be argued that ideas concurring with God’s nature should often be in harmony with God’s *entire* creation (i.e., Christians and non-Christians).

Therefore, Beadles’ suggestion of “making service to God as the central tenet”⁸ (Beadles, 2000) of servant-leadership is proper. However, his objective that this “put a barrier up for those who would seek a more syncretistic approach” (Beadles, 2000) is questionable.

If servant-leadership does not oppose God’s nature, Christians should not discourage non-Christians from practicing servant-leadership. Jesus informed His disciples that when they prevented a man from casting out demons *because he was not one of them* (Luke 9:49), they were in error. “‘Do not stop him,’ Jesus said, ‘for whoever is not against you is for you’” (Luke 9:50).

Impracticality of Servant-Leadership

Beadles clarifies his second concern with an example of competing constituencies, all who should be served. “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” (Beadles, 2000). There are at least two problems with this contention. First, Scripture teaches that God’s ways often appear impossible (Matthew 19:25-26) and are superior to our understanding (Isaiah 55:9), and our following constitutes faith (Hebrews 11:1). To the disciples, dying on the cross was ludicrous (Matthew 16:21-23), yet the disciples’ inability to understand did not

make God's plan erroneous. Though the concept of servant-leadership seems to be unrealizable, this does not indicate that servant-leadership is unbiblical and we should simplify it to our understanding.

Second, Beadles' example ignores the opportunity for *true* servant-leadership (i.e., the servant-leader *sacrificing* while serving). The servant-leader might drastically reduce her own wage to offset a wage increase to employees. In this manner, neither the customer or stockholder are disserved. Because the servant-leader has merely shifted a significant portion of her salary to her employees, customers need not be charged more and the stock's book value is unchanged. A servant-leader prefers to take from herself, not others, when serving.

Emphasize Authority

The third concern of Beadles, *authority is exercised too sparingly*, is without empirical support and may be unfounded. Contrarily, one might conjecture that humans naturally gravitate toward a traditional management style (i.e., authoritarian) and that servant-leadership requires a conscious effort. If so, our

authoritarian nature needs to be reigned in, not billowed. It is probably a safe generalization that most leaders have become angry (i.e., similar to when Christ purified the temple),⁹ but have infrequently turned the other cheek (Matthew 5:39), readily given more than is asked to a plaintiff that is suing (Matthew 5:40), forgiven a wrongdoer 77 times (Matthew 18:21-22), or washed others' feet (John 13:14-17).

Beadles desires leaders to exercise authority "without guilt, because it is an authority that is exercised in the context of submission to a higher authority" (Beadles, 2000). This concept is appealing, but unfortunately our sinful nature prevents any leader from being in complete submission to God (i.e., knowing and following the will of God at all times). We all see through a glass darkly (I Corinthians 13:12) and are imperfect (Romans 3:23). History indicates that guilt-free leaders *exercising the authority of God* have caused much harm, including wrongful suffering and death (e.g., the Crusades and the Inquisition). Guilt may be a healthy and appropriate characteristic in servant-leaders that should not be quenched. Christ's parable of the Pharisee

and tax collector clearly instructs that a penitent attitude, rather than self-righteous attitude, is proper (Luke 18:9-14).

Serving God

Beadles' fourth and final concern, *service to humankind is emphasized rather than service to God*, may be circular. Knowing whether or not one's actions are serving God is difficult to assess. Apparently both the righteous (John 25:37) and unrighteous (John 25:44) serve, or disserve, God unknowingly. Fortunately, the dilemma of properly serving God is diminished, thanks to Christ's teaching that the very essence of serving God is serving others—"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). Subsequent to washing the disciples' feet, Christ teaches them to follow his example and be servants of others (John 13:12-17). Therefore, according to Scripture, service to others, which is the heart of service-leadership, is also service to God.

Conclusion: Refining Servant-Leadership

Beadles should be commended for continuing a much-needed discussion on the

proper biblical understanding and implementation of servant-leadership. His two ideas for refining servant-leadership, *making God the central tenant and exercising authority more often*, are worth considering. However, rather than progressing servant-leadership, Beadles' refinements may devolve servant-leadership towards a more traditional, authoritarian style of leadership. A leader, exercising authority *carte-blanche*, while believing she is placing God first, can easily become dictatorial.

I would suggest that a more pressing refinement in servant-leadership is to become greater sacrificial servants. As the writer of Hebrews astutely observes, our feeble attempts at following God (e.g., being servant-leaders) pain us little and have much room for improvement.¹⁰ For example, Christ-like servant-leaders should empathize and live among their followers, as did Christ, not separated by social-economic barriers.¹¹ Means of sincerely enacting and achieving sacrificing servant-leadership might include the following: (1) reduce one's own salary to an amount equal to, or below, the lowest paid employee, (2) implement honest marketing campaigns that clearly state the negatives of the

company's product or service, (3) report to stockholders that income is a by-product, not a major concern of the organization, (4) have a greater concern for employees' personal lives than their work performance, (5) live in a non-affluent area of town rather than a gated community on lakefront property, (6) drive an inconspicuous automobile rather than a new luxury vehicle.

These are bold actions that require a servant-leader of great faith to implement, particularly given that such initiatives are not only sacrificial, but may result in leadership failure (based on worldly measures), rather than success.¹² Regardless, the servant-leader would be truly exhibiting that her treasures are in heaven and not of earth (Matthew 6:19-20). Those who witness such pure Christ-like servant-leadership might be so refreshingly touched that they are brought closer to the kingdom. This, Scripture indicates, is the greatest achievement of any servant-leader (Luke 15:7).

ENDNOTES

¹That is, practicable by those who are not Christians. "The theory itself can be accepted and practiced by Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and atheists alike" (Beadles, 2000).
²"Virtually any decision that is made to serve one stakeholder necessitates that the manager/leader is not serving another stakeholder" (Beadles, 2000).

³"...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" (Beadles, 2000).

⁴Beadles writes, citing Spears (1998), that servant-leadership is "a model that puts serving others—including employees, customers, and community—as the number one priority."

⁵"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" (Beadles, 2000).

⁶These characteristics of servant-leadership are listed in Beadles (2000) and attributed to Greenleaf (1977) and Spears (1998).

⁷God is "...preeminent in all things and central to His creation and all the creature's activities" (Beadles, 2000).

⁸Assessing whether one is *placing God first* is extremely difficult to assess. This will be discussed more fully in the **Emphasize Authority** section of this rejoinder.

⁹Christ purifying the temple (John 2:14-18) is Beadles' example of Christ exercising authority.

¹⁰"In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (Hebrews 12:4).

¹¹"Jesus replied, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head'" (Luke 9:58).

¹²Worldly failure, however, is not an indication of ungodliness. Recall that Christ, the greatest servant-leader, was spit upon, slapped, and crucified (Matthew 26:67-68).

REFERENCES

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