

# When Leadership Goes Wrong: Self-Serving Shepherds and their Followers

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**ABSTRACT:** In Christian business circles, leadership is usually viewed positively. After all, we have as an example the best leader in human history, Jesus Christ. The Bible describes how to lead effectively, but it spends more time warning against people who abuse the power that comes with a formal leadership role. The negative fallout from this abuse is considerable. Abuses of leadership are easy to find in the business world. How should Christian business people respond? After reviewing the literature on self-serving leaders and examining what Scripture says about this topic, suggestions are given for how Christians can stand up to abusive leadership in the marketplace.

**KEYWORDS:** self-serving leadership, abusive supervision, followers, self-serving shepherds, power, shepherd leadership

## INTRODUCTION

“Most people can bear adversity. But if you wish to know what a man really is, give him power.”  
(spoken by Robert G. Ingersoll of President Abraham Lincoln)

“He who seeks to deceive will always find someone who will allow himself to be deceived.”  
(Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*)

The abuse of power by leaders has occurred throughout human history. It is a central theme of the great American novel *Moby Dick*, which was written just as the highly lucrative American whaling industry was coming to its end. Captain Ahab had been charged by the owners of his ship to procure as much whale oil as possible. Ahab, however, eschewed this responsibility in favor of exacting revenge on Moby Dick, the massive whale that in a previous journey separated Ahab from one of his legs. So, instead of using his ship and crew to harvest profitable whale oil, Captain Ahab used them to pursue and destroy Moby Dick. Ahab’s charismatic leadership quickly won over the entire crew save one, first mate Starbuck (after whom the Starbucks coffee chain is named). Starbuck, a devout Quaker, wrestled with the conflict between his duty to his captain and his conscience, which told him that the leader of the ship was using his power for his own selfish and immoral ends.

Starbuck is a classic example of a follower being led by an abusive, self-serving leader. Starbuck agonizingly reflected: My soul is more than matched; she’s overmanned; and by a madman (Ahab)! ... But he drilled deep down, and blasted all my reason out of me! I think I see his impious end; but feel that I must help him to it. Will I, nill I, the ineffable thing has tied me to him.... Horrible old man! Who’s over him, he cries; ... look how he lords it over all below! Oh! I plainly see my miserable office,—to obey, rebelling;... I would up heart, were it not like lead. (Melville, 1851, p. 228)

Later, when Starbuck directly confronted Ahab, imploring him to discontinue his self-serving pursuit of Moby Dick, we read: “[Starbuck] waxes brave, but nevertheless obeys; most careful bravery that!” murmured Ahab, as Starbuck disappeared” (p. 605). Failing to muster the courage to counter the captain named after evil King Ahab of Israel, Starbuck suffers the fate of the entire ship and crew (save one shipmate), death by Moby Dick.

We do not have to look to fiction for examples of self-serving leaders. Bernie Madoff (Adair, 2016), among many others, comes to mind. Nor are Christian leaders exempt. Apologist Ravi Zacharias and Roman Catholic priest pedophiles likely had their own Starbucks, who were unable to save them from themselves or from destroying the lives of others. While the Bible certainly acknowledges the importance of leadership (e.g., Proverbs 11:14; 29:18), it spends more time warning against

corrupt, self-serving leaders as will be shown by multiple biblical examples in the pages that follow. Interestingly, Jesus refers to his disciples as leaders only once (Luke 22:24-30). The word usually translated “leader” appears eight other times in the Gospel of Luke, and in all but one of these instances, the leaders (religious or civic officials) are described in unfavorable terms (Dyck, 2013). Are leaders important? Absolutely. Do leaders do good? Not nearly as often as they should.

The purpose of this paper is to examine self-serving leaders and their followers. The literature on leadership is voluminous. Much less has been written, especially by Christians, about self-serving leaders and even less about how their followers should respond. This is unfortunate given how common corrupt leadership is. After an overview of the literature on self-serving leadership, instances of this leadership in the Old Testament will be explored, followed by an examination of self-serving leadership in the New Testament. The conclusion will consider scriptural principles for helping followers respond to self-serving leaders in today’s business world.

### SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE ON CORRUPT, SELF-SERVING LEADERSHIP

Although writing on bad leaders is as old as the Greek classics and Shakespeare, social scientists and management scholars have only begun to study this type of leader in the last couple decades. In 1990, Conger as well as Hogan, Rashkin, and Fazzini, wrote about what they called the dark side of leadership. Discussion of this type of leadership by Christian business scholars has been nearly nonexistent (Cohee & Voorhies, 2021; Dyck, 2013; Smith & Hasselfeld, 2013 are exceptions), with leadership almost always portrayed in a positive light, if articles in the *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business* are any indication. Thus, this is clearly an area in need of investigation by Christian scholars.

#### Terminology

Given both the breadth and relative newness of this area, it is important to begin by clarifying basic terminology. First, we begin with leaders, managers, supervisors, and bosses. All these terms appear in this literature. For the purposes of this paper, they will be treated synonymously. The difference between leaders and managers has been debated since at least 1977 when Zaleznik’s classic *Harvard Business Review* article

contrasted the two. Leadership and management are different, and the difference is significant (Zaleznik, 1977), but not for the purposes of this article. The focus here is how people in positions of formal authority (with what French and Raven (1959) called legitimate or position power)—be they leaders, executives, managers, supervisors, or bosses—abuse their power over others. Of course, the results of the abuse are more significant the more power such a person has (which is usually correlated with how high up in the company they reside). But even first-level supervisors can lead in an abusive way.

Another important distinction is between what is here called “self-serving” leadership and “limited” leadership. In speaking here of the dark side of leadership or self-serving leadership, we are not speaking of ineffective leadership. While self-serving leadership is ultimately ineffective for its followers and organization, it is qualitatively different from what is here termed limited leadership. At one level, all leadership is of limited effectiveness because no leader is perfect. Hamlin (2016) describes such leaders and how their followers should respond to them. Any given leader will be deficient in any number of ways (e.g., limited vision, experience, technical expertise, compassion), which will cause their leadership to be less than ideal. This includes leaders who are overly laissez-faire or authoritarian (in layman’s terms, an overbearing boss). Such leaders are here referred to as limited, and they are not the focus of this paper.

Rather than limited leaders, the attention here is on self-serving leaders. While it can be argued that 100% of leaders are self-serving in that everyone is by nature selfish, self-serving has a narrower meaning here and one that is consistent with what the literature refers to as the dark side of leadership or abusive supervision. Self-serving leadership involves pursuing one’s own interests over those of followers and one’s organization. It manifests itself in abusive behavior toward followers that results in destructive outcomes. The Bible presents this type of leader as a self-serving shepherd. We will return to this image later in this paper. Chaleff (2009) presents a simple test of whether a leader is self-serving and not just limited: Is their leadership dishonest and abusive? To the behaviors of dishonesty and abuse can be added the outcomes of toxicity and destruction (Lipman-Blumen, 2008; Schyns & Hansbrough, 2010). It may take time, but eventually the rotten fruits of self-serving leadership will be harvested. It will be shown below that self-serving leadership is more complex than Chaleff’s (2009) simple test, but the test is a good place to start.

## Issues

The secular literature addresses several issues involving self-serving leaders, the reasons some people lead this way, the impact they have, and the coping mechanisms of their followers. The amount of attention given to each issue varies widely. The most basic issue is identifying just what a self-serving leader is. How researchers frame this also varies widely, with abusive, toxic, personalized, dark, and narcissistic being the most common descriptors. A single agreed-upon label has not yet emerged in the literature. Tepper et al. (2017) define abusive supervision as “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (p. 126). This differs from abrasive supervision, which is less severe and akin to tough love. Truly abusive leadership is a sustained behavioral pattern of severe or hostile action in contrast to an occasional outburst of anger or a heated disagreement over an idea. Recipients of abusive supervision experience symptoms similar to those diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (Tepper et al., 2017) and feel deeply oppressed, demeaned, disrespected, and/or de-energized (Sutton, 2017). Thus, the self-serving leader is clearly different from the merely tough boss.

Other times referred to as toxic leaders, self-serving leaders leave their followers and companies worse off than they found them, epitomized by Captain Ahab. Although the outcome is usually not as extreme as Ahab’s, significant damage can definitely be done. According to Lipman-Blumen (2008), “[T]oxic leaders are those individuals who, by virtue of their destructive behaviors and dysfunctional personal characteristics/qualities, generate serious and enduring poisonous effects on the individuals, families, organizations, even entire societies they lead” (p. 182). The Bible’s King Ahab, Bernie Madoff, and Volkswagen’s Martin Winterkorn quickly come to mind. They all led at the expense of others to meet self-serving ends, such as amassing scarce financial resources for themselves (Rus et al., 2010).

Self-serving managers engage in personalized leadership, which is leadership for the good of the leader as opposed to socialized leadership, which is leadership for the good of others (House & Howell, 1992). Their leadership is not just limited, but also corrupt (Schyns & Hansbrough, 2010). Having clarified what self-serving leadership is, attention is now turned to what causes some people to lead this way. Although a definitive answer has not yet been found, research has uncovered

several important clues. These leaders typically have very large egos, believing they are more skilled than everyone else and perhaps even infallible (Danley & Hughes, 2016). They are highly manipulative (Galvin, 2012). For example, CEOs who exploit their unique access to the board of directors in order to subtly manipulate board members’ views in pursuit of their personal goals. Sutton (2017) describes their motives as Machiavellian.

Using the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association*, Hogan and Hogan (1997) developed a psychometric assessment that measures the dark side of leadership along eleven dimensions or personality traits. They are borderline, paranoid, avoidant, schizoid, passive-aggressive, narcissistic, antisocial, histrionic, schizotypal, obsessive-compulsive, and dependent. The most commonly cited characteristic of self-serving leaders in the literature is narcissism (Smith & Hasselfeld, 2013). An individual with narcissistic personality disorder displays grandiosity; an inflated sense of self-importance; excessive need for admiration; lack of empathy and self-awareness; and difficulty forming healthy, close relationships, especially with subordinates (DeGroat, 2020). Pride, shame, anxiety, and insecurity are at the root of narcissism, driving the narcissist to manipulate and bully others to compensate for his inadequacies. With respect to leadership, narcissists are motivated by their needs for power and admiration rather than concern for their followers or the organizations they lead (Judge et al., 2009). Companies can enable narcissistic leaders, so responsibility for this type of dysfunctional behavior lies not just with the leader. More on this later.

The dark triad of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy (Christie & Geis, 1970) is associated with abusive supervision (Tepper et al., 2017). Machiavellianism includes manipulation of others, immorality, lack of empathy, and high levels of self-interest while psychopathy is characterized by antisocial behavior, impulsivity, selfishness, and remorselessness. In addition to these personality dysfunctions, Tepper et al. (2017) identify self-regulation impairment and social learning as contributing to abusive behavior in supervisors. The capacity to self-regulate can be impaired by the emotional and mental resource demands of strenuous managerial roles. Through social learning processes, for example imitating respected role models’ behavior (like senior leaders or parental figures), managers can come to believe that abusive behavior is acceptable and rewarding. While it is not difficult to find examples of narcissistic

leaders in the business world, such leaders are becoming more common throughout society and even in the church (DeGroat, 2020). Finally, while research shows that narcissistic personality disorder is negatively associated with long-term leadership effectiveness, moderate levels of narcissism are positively associated with effectiveness as a leader (Grijalva et al., 2015).

The negative impact of self-serving leadership has already been introduced. More specifically, abusive leadership results in poor individual and group morale, absenteeism, turnover, and reduced performance of extra-role behaviors by employees (Tepper, 2000). Subordinates experience abusive supervision as a source of injustice. It is associated with higher rates of depression among followers as well as an increase in counterproductive work behavior (Tepper et al., 2017). As mentioned above, it can also lead to post traumatic stress disorder. With such deleterious effects, it is reasonable to ask why followers succumb to such leaders. As Machiavelli himself noted in the quote at the beginning of this paper, plenty of people allow themselves to be deceived. Why? Some people are just naïve, overly trusting, or have weak interpersonal skills. Furthermore, narcissistic leaders initially appear likable (Smith & Hasselfeld, 2013). They may be charismatic (Conger, 1990), and they do not alarm people, at least not at first. Mayo (2017) asks this question: If humble people make the best leaders, why do we fall for charismatic narcissists? Her answer: because people typically romanticize leaders and hope for superheroes. The self-serving leader responds to these needs by exuding the image of a stereotypically effective leader who can ease others' anxieties. This effect is especially strong in times of crisis or when something is broken. Lipman-Blumen (2008) describes how the self-serving leader helps people feel as though their basic psychological needs will be met. These include needs for security and certainty as well as acceptance and inclusion in a group or community. Ironically, the self-serving leader makes people feel as though they are part of something bigger than themselves. As a result, followers readily acquiesce to such leaders. Resisting them is difficult because the personal, social, and economic costs (like losing one's job) can be high. Even if people become dissatisfied with such leaders, they usually assume or hope that someone else will oust them.

It can also be difficult to resist self-serving leaders when dysfunctional organizations inadvertently enable their bad behavior. Boards of directors or other superiors can be negligent in their oversight of executives and not aware of their abuse (Hartley & Claycomb, 2014). An empirical

study of corporate directors found that they view their primary role as partnering with CEOs, not monitoring them, even as regards executive opportunism and outright fraud (Boivie et al., 2021). The assumption that boards monitor executives so they act in the best interests of the firm was found to be faulty. According to Langberg (2020), "Even when acts of abuse are perpetuated solely by an organization's leader, his or her behaviors tend to be perpetuated by a systemic organizational response with the goal of preserving the system in reaction to a perceived threat" (p. 75). Companies naturally want to protect themselves and their senior leaders. Those in power seek to remain in power by perpetuating the status quo. Abusive leaders often have powerful allies in human resources, the legal department, and senior management (Sutton, 2017). These groups have incentives to protect the abuser, such as maintaining the company's reputation and keeping their own jobs. Many firms have inadequate mechanisms in place to hold leaders, especially senior ones, accountable to allegations of abuse or corruption (Danley & Hughes, 2016). Leaders are often hired and retained based on loyalty and are exempted from accountability to their subordinates. If serious problems emerge and whistleblowing ensues, it is the whistleblowers who often face retaliation by the organization (Alford, 2008). The unfortunate consequence of ignoring abusive behavior is permission to the offender to continue behaving inappropriately (Economy, 2021).

The failure to hold senior leaders accountable for abusive behavior leads to several negative outcomes for a company (Danley & Hughes, 2016). These include employee vigilantism, public airing (leaks) of organizational problems (since mechanisms to air concerns internally are lacking), double standards, and refusal by leaders to apologize or change. In addition, there can be false pacification of legitimate complaints by telling complainants that they are correct and promising that their issues will be addressed, but this isn't followed by meaningful change. Faced with such frustration, employees often respond with hostile acts directed at their manager, the organization, and sometimes even their own family. While much more research is needed on coping responses, initial findings suggest that avoidance is not helpful (Tepper et al., 2017).

Having considered several issues associated with self-serving leaders, this literature review will conclude by describing how followers and their firms should respond to abusive leadership. Gabarro and Kotter's (1980) classic *Harvard Business Review* article "Managing your

Boss” brought formal attention to the responsibilities of followers. Interestingly, their focus was only on how employees could support their bosses. No mention was made of the possibility of abusive bosses and how to respond to them. Of course, employees should support their bosses, but supporting self-serving bosses can be devastating. Bernie Madoff was only able to pull off the largest Ponzi scheme in history with the assistance of five key accomplices (Rodger, 2016). The SEC never got warnings or complaints from any of Madoff’s employees, only from analysts and competitors. These five employees could have spoken up at board meetings or during multiple SEC audits, but they never did. They failed as followers. To speak would have required the difficult job of whistleblowing. “The whistleblower is one who seeks to be a responsible follower and frequently ends up being a victim, pushed not just to the margins of the organization, but frequently to the margins of society” (Alford, 2008, p. 238). Whistleblowing is a strong response to self-serving leadership. It is also a very risky one.

Carsten (2016) describes four possible role orientations of followers: passive (accept leaders’ power without question, even if it is wielded unjustly), antiauthoritarian (resist any influence attempts made by leaders beyond basic compliance with job responsibilities), leading-up (exert informal leadership with fellow followers and superiors from a position without formal authority), and coproduction. Coproduction seems most appropriate in response to self-serving leaders. These followers work cooperatively with leaders but will constructively challenge them if they believe leaders are making poor decisions that are harmful to the organization. However, it can be very difficult to challenge most leaders, especially self-serving ones.

Self-serving leaders create a situation where employee loyalty should be limited. Randall (1987) advocates for “partial inclusion,” which means that employees do not have to be totally committed to their employers. Similarly, Seibert (2001) explains how there are limits to the degree to which employees (especially Christians) should allow themselves to be socialized by their companies. This is especially important when facing a self-serving leader. Sutton (2017) describes a study where Machiavellians instinctively went into overdrive, conniving ways to exploit people whose response to them was cooperative and fair. To a Machiavellian, these people’s kindness is perceived as weakness and vulnerability. In contrast, the Machiavellians in this study backed off when the people they worked with were uncooperative and self-focused like themselves.

A study of confrontation of abusive managers found that effective confrontation was well-targeted (aimed directly at the abuser), well-timed, (occurred proximate in time to an instance of abuse), and well-tempered (motivated and designed to stop the abuse and not exact revenge). However, this same study found that about two-thirds of confrontation efforts failed to change abusive bosses (Hornstein, 2016). Sutton (2017) and Economy (2021) provide other tactics for responding to self-serving leaders. This paper will conclude with suggested responses after considering what the Bible has to say about self-serving leaders. Finally, regarding the results of confronting abusive leaders, Tepper et al. (2015) report that confrontational employees are less prone to see themselves as victims, more satisfied with their jobs, more committed to their organizations, and more likely to maintain their dignity.

More research is needed on how followers can respond effectively to self-serving leaders. Research is also needed on how these leaders’ superiors should handle them as well as the organizational cultures, structures, and HR policies that can prevent and mitigate this destructive form of leadership. The literature makes it clear that self-serving leaders exist and that their abusive leadership brings significant harm to their employees and companies. We now consider what the Bible says about this unfortunate form of leadership.

## SELF-SERVING LEADERSHIP IN THE BIBLE

### The Old Testament

Self-serving leadership is actually a central theme of Scripture from Genesis through Revelation. It can be contrasted with appropriate leadership. Perhaps the most common image of an appropriate leader in the Bible is the shepherd. Shepherds are charged with protecting, nurturing, and developing their flock. God himself is described as a shepherd (e.g., Psalm 23; Isaiah 40:10-11). With God as their example, Israel’s leaders were called to care for the people as shepherds care for their sheep (e.g., Numbers 27:16-17; Ezekiel 34:2, 11-16; Psalms 23, 72). A good shepherd was indispensable to a flock’s well-being. During King Ahab’s corrupt reign, the prophet Micaiah declared, “I saw all Israel scattered on mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd” (I Kings 22:17 ESV). Israel had a powerful leader—Ahab—but clearly not an appropriate shepherd. Good shepherds need to be powerful, but their power needs to be wielded for their sheep, not themselves.

Unfortunately, too many of Israel's leaders were like Ahab. Cried Isaiah,

The leaders of my people—the LORD's watchmen, his shepherds—are blind and ignorant. They are like silent watchdogs that give no warning when danger comes. They love to lie around, sleeping and dreaming. Like greedy dogs, they are never satisfied. They are ignorant shepherds, all *following their own path and intent on personal gain*. "Come," they say, "let's get some wine and have a party. Let's all get drunk. Then tomorrow we'll do it again and have an even bigger party!" (56:10-12 NLT, emphasis added)

These self-indulgent, gluttonous leaders are driven by personal gain. They are the picture of leaders who serve themselves and whose ultimate judgment and doom is sure. "Wail, you shepherds and cry out, and roll in ashes, you lords of the flock, for the days of your slaughter and dispersion have come, and you shall fall like a choice vessel" (Jeremiah 25:34 ESV). Regrettably, abusive shepherds and their enablers should not come as a surprise. "If you see oppression of the poor and perversion of justice and righteousness in the province, don't be astonished at the situation, because one official protects another official, and higher officials protect them" (Ecclesiastes 5:8 CSB). It should not surprise us, therefore, that recent management scholars, as described earlier, have found that organizations protect abusive leaders. But responsibility for these leadership abuses lies not just with the leaders and their organizational enablers. Sadly, their followers also embrace their perversion! As Jeremiah decries: "The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own authority. My people love it like this" (5:31 CSB).

Space here does not permit coverage of every instance of self-serving shepherding in the Old Testament. Instead, attention will be given to instances where this issue is addressed most vividly. We begin with Samuel, a shepherd who fulfilled the roles of Levite, prophet, and judge for Israel around 1100 B.C. As Samuel completed his time of godly leadership, he did something very instructive. Before passing the mantle of leadership to Saul, Samuel held himself and his service publicly accountable before the people (1 Samuel 12: 3-5). He offered to pay restitution to anyone he had wronged with his power. No one came forward with a claim, but the mere fact that Samuel made this offer demonstrates that he led with transparency and accountability, as God would expect of a good shepherd. However, if Samuel himself led faithfully,

he failed to prepare his sons to succeed him. After Samuel stepped down, the people of Israel began asking for a king, in part because they felt the office of judge would not be in good hands upon Samuel's death.

Samuel is remembered for pleading with the people of Israel not to demand a king. Why should they need a human king when Yahweh was their king and shepherd? Eventually, God told Samuel to give the people what they wanted. But he also directed Samuel to explain to the people that the result of investing power in a human king would be self-serving leadership. This abuse is detailed in 1 Samuel 8:10-17, which includes conscripting sons, daughters, servants, and even donkeys into the king's service; confiscating the best fields, vineyards, and orchards; and taxing produce and livestock. "When that day comes, you will cry out because of the king you've chosen for yourselves, but the LORD won't answer you on that day" (1 Samuel 8:18 CSB). The people disregarded God's warning, and God relented to their demand for a king. God made the dangers of concentrating power in a fallible leader crystal clear. The people ignored the danger and pleaded for what would soon oppress them.

God laid out standards for Israel's kings (Wright, 2020). They were to not indulge themselves with wives, horses, or gold, three timeless pitfalls of sex, power, and riches (Deuteronomy 17:16-17). They were to ensure integrity through systems of accountability (1 Samuel 12:1-5). They were to pursue justice (Proverbs 31:3, 8-9; Micah 6:8). And they were to constantly remind themselves of God's law (Deuteronomy 17:18-20). This last point is especially important. As much power as he had, a king was still subject to God and his law so that "his heart will not be exalted above his countrymen" (Deuteronomy 17:20 CSB). Even the most senior leader was accountable to a higher authority and should not have placed himself above those he led. Importantly, God commanded the people to prioritize obedience to his commands over obedience to their king. God was less concerned about rebellion against a king and more concerned about rebellion against himself.

Behold, the LORD has set a king over you. If you will fear the LORD and serve and obey him and obey his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the LORD your God, it will be well. But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you and the king. (1 Samuel 12:13-15 ESV)

Israel's first kings—Saul, David, and Solomon—all succumbed to self-serving behavior to varying degrees, including behavior as serious as murder. Solomon's son Rehoboam was so abusive that Israel divided into northern and southern factions when those in the north rebelled against Rehoboam's self-serving leadership.

The succeeding kings of the northern kingdom were universally denounced, with King Ahab being the worst (1 Kings 16:30). King Ahab blamed Elijah, one of Israel's faithful shepherds, for the trouble he himself caused Israel, and Ahab's wife, Jezebel, threatened to kill Elijah. Ahab and Jezebel disregarded God's law to steal Naboth's vineyard by murdering him, betraying one of their own subjects (1 Kings 21). Jeroboam II achieved worldly success by ruling longer than any other northern king, leading expansive geographical growth and producing the greatest economic prosperity in Israel since Solomon (2 Kings 14). His leadership, however, was also characterized by injustice, corruption, and spiritual decay, eventually leading to the annihilation of all the tribes of the northern kingdom by Assyria. Most of the kings of Israel's southern kingdom fared no better than those in the north. Israel's faithful prophets, like Elijah, denounced her kings primarily for their idolatry and for leading the people away from Yahweh. But these self-serving leaders were also condemned for falling into the timeless traps of power, lust, and greed. The mantle of leadership provided the perfect tool for serving themselves.

Israel's kings were not the only people who exploited the power of their positions for self-serving ends. Zephaniah (3:1-4) and Jeremiah describe how prophets and priests, two other groups of powerful leaders in Israel, succumbed. According to Jeremiah, these "ungodly and wicked" leaders "abuse what power they have" (Jeremiah 23:9-40 NLT). "They commit adultery and love dishonesty, and encourage those who are doing evil" (Jeremiah 23:14). "I [the LORD] am against these false prophets. Their imaginary dreams are flagrant lies that lead my people into sin. I did not send or appoint them" (Jeremiah 23:32). Why would people listen to such leaders? Because they typically tell people what they want to hear (1 Kings 22:11-12; Jeremiah 28:1-4). Micah spoke harshly against leaders of Israel who were destroying their own people: "You false prophets are leading my people astray. You promise peace for those who give you food, but you declare war on those who refuse to feed you" (3:1-4 NLT). These shepherds expected the sheep to feed them! Zechariah concurs: "My [God's] anger burns against you shepherds, and I will punish these leaders"

(Zechariah 10:3 NLT) for Israel's "shepherds have no compassion for (her people)" (Zechariah 11:5 NLT). These self-serving shepherds were more concerned with getting rich than with the well-being of their sheep.

Two of the greatest condemnations of Israel's self-serving shepherds come from the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Ezekiel, who wrote primarily to the Jewish exiles in Babylon, had especially harsh words for "the shepherds, the leaders of Israel":

You shepherds feed yourselves instead of your flocks.... You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flock starve. You have not taken care of the weak. ... You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty. So my [God's] sheep have been scattered without a shepherd, and they are easy prey for any wild animal. ... You took care of yourselves and left the sheep to starve. (Ezekiel 34:2-8 NLT)

Your princes plot conspiracies just as lions stalk their prey. They devour innocent people, seizing treasures and extorting wealth. They make many widows in the land. Your leaders... destroy people's lives for money! And your prophets cover up for them by announcing false visions and making lying predictions. (Ezekiel 22:25-28 NLT)

God declares such shepherds to be his enemies whom He will remove from leadership and eventually destroy. The only thing the LORD will feed them is justice.

Jeremiah's message to King Jehoiakim is a succinct example of truth being spoken to abusive, self-serving power:

And the LORD says, "What sorrow awaits Jehoiakim, who builds his palace with forced labor. He builds injustice into its walls, for he makes his neighbors work for nothing. He does not pay them for their labor. He says, 'I will build a magnificent palace with huge rooms and many windows. I will panel it throughout with fragrant cedar ...'. But a beautiful cedar palace does not make a great king ... You have eyes only for greed and dishonesty! You murder the innocent, oppress the poor, and reign ruthlessly." (Jeremiah 22:13-17 NLT)

Instead, God desired Israel's leaders to quit their evil deeds and do justice. Ezekiel and Jeremiah provide stark descriptions of self-serving shepherds and God's response to them.

God expects his people to stand up to corrupt leaders. “If the godly give in to the wicked, it is like polluting a fountain or muddying a spring” (Proverbs 25:26 NLT). But this will often come at a cost. Jeremiah was thrown down a cistern (chapter 38) and whipped by the head of the Temple security force (chapter 20). Ironically, the person ostensibly responsible for guarding the Temple punished the person who truly cared about God’s Temple. Furthermore, standing up to self-serving leaders will often be lonely and require great courage. The prophet Micaiah spoke against King Ahab while 400 other supposed prophets were telling Ahab what he wanted to hear (1 Kings 22). In describing Daniel’s courage for refusing to comply with all of Nebuchadnezzar’s requirements and then making a contemporary application, David Minja and Kiriimi Barine assert, “The theologically and socially responsible Christian in a business organization, lonely as he often feels, is to stand at times apart from the outside existing structures.... It is precisely this ... solitude that often marks the life of one called to play a prophetic role in society” (as cited in Hill, 2018, p. 125).

Daniel provides a nuanced response to self-serving leadership. Seibert (2001) describes this response in detail. Essentially, Daniel worked responsibly for his leader while at the same time refusing to compromise the essentials of his faith (e.g., chapter 6). In his early relationship with King Saul, David took a similar approach (1 Samuel 18-19). He served Saul while maintaining his own integrity. He did not seek vengeance and even suffered injustice. There was, however, a limit to his forbearance. Hill (2018) refers to this stance as being an accommodating purist. We will return to this idea later. For now, it reminds us that responding to self-serving leaders is often not as simple as simply denouncing their selfish ways. Jeremiah himself commanded exiles who were faced with self-serving Babylonian leaders to “seek the welfare of the city where I sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf” (Jeremiah 29:7 ESV).

To summarize, the Old Testament’s model for leadership is a good shepherd. However, most shepherds end up selfishly serving not their sheep but themselves, which should not surprise us. Sadly, followers often welcome this. God, however, condemns this form of leadership and calls his genuine followers to resist it by following him and not the self-serving leader.

### **Self-Serving Shepherds in the New Testament**

Not surprisingly, the New Testament continues the line of thinking on this issue that was developed in the

Old Testament. Jesus, the ultimate leader, is presented as not just a shepherd, but a great (Hebrews 13:20) and good (John 10:11) shepherd who is the polar opposite of a self-serving leader, ultimately being willing to die for his followers. The idea of leaders as shepherds is later applied to elders of the church (e.g., 1 Peter 5:1-4). Yet once again, many people will abuse their leadership power, with tax collector Zacchaeus being but one example among many (Luke 19:1-10). Some commentators conclude that the thieves and robbers Jesus criticized in John chapter 10 are the self-serving shepherds of his day, the Jewish leaders (Burge, 2008; MacArthur, 2006). When making this critique, Jesus was likely thinking of the corrupt leaders condemned in Ezekiel chapter 34 (described above).

Elsewhere, Jesus acknowledged the existence of false leaders: “Be on guard against false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravaging wolves. You’ll recognize them by their fruit” (Matthew 7:15-16a CSB). As there will be imposters in the church, likewise contemporary businesses may have leaders who actually care nothing for the company but only for themselves. In the context of a discussion of authority and leadership, Jesus reminded his disciples that “the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high positions act as tyrants over them” (Matthew 20:25 CSB). That those in high positions are often despots succinctly captures what both the secular literature and Bible have to say about self-serving leaders. Self-serving leadership is the opposite of the leadership Jesus espouses. If even Jesus could be subject to someone—his Father—then the disciples were not above being subject to their followers (Matthew 20:26-27). Jesus said this in response to James and John’s mother’s request that her sons be seated in the places of honor in Jesus’s Kingdom (Matthew 20:21). This request drew the ire of the other ten disciples. Everyone in the story, save Jesus, had a perverted view of authority and leadership. Even Jesus’s closest followers were maneuvering for power. Once again, we see the intoxicating allure of leadership power. Thus, the New Testament, as the Old, equates godly leadership with good shepherds, yet acknowledges how common self-serving leadership is as well as how easy it will be for people to succumb to it. It also clearly warns against this type of leadership.

As with the Old Testament, instances of self-serving leadership in the New Testament are too common for all of them to be covered here. Our focus beyond Jesus’s view of leadership will be the letters of John and Jude, which speak directly to the dangers of self-serving leaders. The

primary purpose of 3 John is to reprove and discredit a self-serving leader. Diotrephes was improperly controlling the church to which John was writing. Stemming from pride and selfish ambition, Diotrephes had assumed authority for himself and refused the authority of John, even slandering him with malicious words (3 John vs. 10). Diotrephes “loves to be the leader” (vs. 9 NLT). Wanting to rule his local church without answering to outside authority, Diotrephes had expelled people from the church who did not follow him. John instructed Gaius, one of the legitimate leaders of this church, to not submit to Diotrephes self-serving leadership. Importantly, Diotrephes was not condemned for false teaching or heresy but for living contrary to Christian love. John instructed Gaius to discern legitimate leadership by ascertaining if the person did good and walked in a way that respected God (3 John vs. 11). Gaius’ first priority was to follow God, not a human leader.

In this third letter, John reminds readers that orthopraxy—correct conduct—is as important as orthodoxy—correct doctrine. A good shepherd leads by embracing both. Jesus’s brother James’ letter emphasized the vital importance of orthopraxy (James 1:22; 2:14). Another brother of Jesus, Jude, also stressed the importance of leaders’ behavior, not just their beliefs. The central message of the short but powerful letter of Jude is a warning about self-serving leaders. Jude tells his readers that these “... shameless shepherds care only for themselves,” (Jude vs. 12), giving a concise definition of the self-serving leader. Coming to their positions by stealth, Jude focused primarily on their ungodly lifestyles, which included sexual immorality, rejection of authority, slander, blasphemy, grumbling, and divisiveness. “Their mouths utter arrogant words, flattering people for their own advantage” (Jude vs. 16b). Jude declares God’s judgment on what he calls fruitless trees, waterless clouds carried by the wind, dangerous reefs, and wild waves of the sea depositing shameful deeds on the shore. Like fruitless trees and waterless clouds, they appear useful but in the end are not. Like dangerous reefs and wild waves as well as like the classic self-serving leader, what they do accomplish is ultimately destructive.

John’s second letter warns that “many deceivers have gone out into the world; they do not confess the coming of Jesus in the flesh” (2 John vs. 7 CSB). John’s warning goes beyond advocating for orthodoxy to include orthopraxy. Doctrinal truth about Jesus and loving others go hand in hand. The deceptive leaders John wrote about demonstrated neither. In addition to not receiving (or

even greeting) such leaders, Christians are charged with remaining in Christ’s teaching and walking according to his commandments, the chief being to love one another. How reminiscent this is of the Old Testament’s plea to give allegiance to the law, not the king.

Jesus, John, and Jude, among others, make it clear that some leaders should not be followed. This message occurs alongside others in the New Testament calling for deference to authority. Peter called early Christians who were experiencing marked persecution to “submit to every human authority” (1 Peter 2:13a), referring to government officials. Paul instructed Roman Christians to submit to governing authorities (Romans 13:1-7). Peter told slaves to submit to their masters, even cruel ones (1 Peter 2:18-19). These remind us that there can be situations where Christians are called to be subject even to authority that abuses its power. However, it is important to note that these instructions were given in the context of the Roman government and first-century slavery. Hill (2018) argues that the master-slave relationship of Jesus’s time has no direct parallel or application to today. Peter and John make it clear that submission to God takes priority over submission to human authority (Acts 4:18-20). “We must obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29). The conclusion is that Christians are to respect authority but not generally use that as a reason to acquiesce to self-serving leaders.

Indeed, the churches at Pergamum (Revelation 2:14-15) and Thyatira (Revelation 2:20-21) were reprimanded for tolerating deceptive, sexually immoral, and disobedient leaders instead of obeying God. Paul instructed Timothy to bring elders at the church in Ephesus to account if two or three witnesses had evidence against them (1 Timothy 5:19-20) and also described removing two leaders—Hymenaeus and Alexander—from the church (1 Timothy 1:20). Dyck (2013) argues that a theme of the Gospel of Luke is the appropriateness of believers standing up to managers who abuse their power. Perhaps most importantly, “[Jesus] stood against anything and everything that deformed, crushed, and destroyed humanity, including religious leaders” (Langberg, 2020, p. 86). Jesus acknowledged abuses of power by individuals and institutions and stood instead with Samaritans, women, lepers, and others without power. Christians should not assume that leaders and organizations are always in the right. Instead, they should expose that which is not pleasing to God, no matter where it is found, even if it is found in leaders or organizations for which they have affection.

## A BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO SELF-SERVING BUSINESS LEADERS TODAY

Even though the Bible was obviously not originally written to Christian business people of today, it provides many practical applications to those who find themselves being led by someone who is self-serving. Several of these have already been implied. More will now be explicated. The first issue is to recognize that multiple parties bear responsibility for self-serving leaders. Followers can only do so much given their position of subordinate power. The leaders' superiors (executives, CEO, board of directors) bear ultimate responsibility. Further, the company, through its structure, HR policies, and leadership climate, is also responsible for the actions of its leaders. Next, it is vital to realize that self-serving leaders can produce strong results as measured by worldly standards (e.g., revenue, market share), at least in the short-term. Simply because leaders are producing such results does not mean they are leading appropriately. Recall the accomplishments of Israel's king Jeroboam II discussed earlier. Herod the Great, the Roman-appointed king of Judea at the time of Jesus's birth, was called "the Great" for renovating the Temple and transforming Caesarea into a vibrant port city, among other achievements. Jeroboam II and Herod are but two examples of many leaders who succeeded on one level, but failed miserably on another, more important level by ultimately being self-serving.

A final preliminary issue is the need to discern that a leader really is a self-serving narcissist and not just a limited, imperfect leader. Danley and Hughes (2016) recommend assessing the psychological health of candidates when hiring for important leadership positions. Barring a professional psychological evaluation, caution should be exercised in labeling someone a self-serving narcissistic leader. Drawing on the management literature and Scripture, this paper has identified many of the characteristics of such leaders. If multiple subordinates (and peers, depending on the position held) see these characteristics in a leader, then it is quite possible he or she is indeed self-serving. These characteristics often boil down to three of the seven deadly sins: pride (thirst for power and excessive control), greed, and lust (Kreeft, 1992), all of which include excessive self-indulgence. Jesus's reminder to evaluate people by their fruit (Matthew 17:16) is also a helpful guide here. Orthopraxy is as important as orthodoxy. Given one truly is faced with a self-serving leader, the Bible suggests several appropriate responses.

### Desire Not Leaders Who Reflect the World's Standards

Not only did Israel conform to her pagan neighbors in desiring a king, she also sought the type of king they had, namely one that emphasized absolute power. Wishing for such leaders inevitably results in abuses of power. The best way to respond to a self-serving leader is to avoid getting one in the first place. The allure of a charming, hard-hitting, smooth-talking leader should be avoided. Instead, leaders with track records of humility and genuine service to their followers (Matthew 20:26-27) should be sought. The self-sacrificing shepherd is the desired model of leadership. Interestingly, this advice holds not just for Christians but also for secular companies, as Khurana's (2004) research of the hiring and firing of CEOs at hundreds of companies demonstrates. According to Khurana, the search for a charismatic, supposedly heroic CEO is ultimately irrational and self-defeating.

### Take Action

As modeled by Old Testament prophets and the early church's good shepherds, self-serving shepherds need to be identified and called out for their misdeeds. Christians are obligated to speak truth to unjust power (Langberg, 2020) as Psalms 10 and 58 (among others) clearly do. Kreeft (1992) quotes fourth century archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom: "He who is not angry when he has cause to be, sins" (as cited in Kreeft, 1992, p. 134). To not express anger at abuse and injustice is sinful. Anger appropriately expressed is akin to God's righteous wrath and is a motivation to counteract that which is ungodly, including self-serving leadership. For example, while on the one hand seeking to work responsibly on Nebuchadnezzar's behalf, Daniel was also willing to challenge the king's oppression of the powerless: "Therefore, may my advice seem good to you, my king. Separate yourself from your sins by doing what is right, and from your injustices by showing mercy to the needy. Perhaps there will be an extension of your prosperity" (Daniel 4:27). Nathan's confrontation of David (1 Samuel 12-13), Esther's challenge to King Xerxes (Esther 4:14), and Paul's assertion of his Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28) are three more examples. The following recommendations describe what action against self-serving leaders could look like.

### Pray for and against self-serving leaders.

We should pray for our leaders as Paul advises: First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all

people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. (1 Timothy 2:1-2 ESV)

Jude notes the importance of prayer specifically when faced with self-serving leaders (vs. 20). Wright (2020) argues that we should pray both for and against leaders. Regarding praying against leaders, he points to the Psalms and prophetic books, which give many examples of prayerful appeals to God to restrain the cruel effects of leaders who wielded power for themselves. He suggests praying against leaders when they behave in ways that unmistakably contradict God's values and desires for human well-being or when their actions are obviously driven more by personal ambition than the greater good.

### **Work to Redeem Power**

Langberg's (2020) entire book focuses on the need to redeem power and how that can be done. One way is through complete transparency and open communication across all layers of management. Recall Samuel's transparency when relinquishing leadership and John's bypassing Diotrefes to speak directly with Gaius (3 John). Furthermore, it is likely that John's letter was read corporately to the entire church. There is much in favor of an open-door policy where employees may speak with anyone in management, not just their direct supervisor. An example is the Open-Door Communication Policy during Sam Walton's tenure at Walmart. It offered every employee the opportunity to bring suggestions or concerns to the attention of any member of management, including Sam, to get help with an issue or make improvements for the company. Retired EVP Don Soderquist (2000) told the story of a fired Walmart truck driver going to Sam to ask for his job back. Sam agreed, much to the dismay of the truck driver's supervisor. Sam told the supervisor that one of two things would result. Having spoken directly with Sam and been given a second chance, the employee would turn his performance around or, if not, be fired again. Either way the legitimacy of the open-door policy would be reinforced. Such a policy helps hold leaders accountable since they know that employees can go over their heads. Accountability is essential to limiting self-serving leadership. Not surprisingly, research has demonstrated that accountability mitigates the effects of power on the self-serving behavior of leaders (Rus et al., 2012).

Another way to redeem power is to ensure that all leaders, even and maybe especially CEOs and boards of directors, are held accountable to something (not just

someone) beyond themselves. A consistent critique of self-serving leaders in both the Old and New Testament is that they claimed authority that was not theirs to claim, with those in the most senior positions claiming authority to no one but themselves. This clearly violated God's command that everyone, even the king, was under the authority of God, practically conveyed as being subject to God's Law. Recall that when God allowed Israel to have a king, he commanded the Israelites to obey God's Law over the king. The New Testament corollary is the disciples' admonition to obey God not people (Acts 5:29). Biblical followers are only compelled to follow to the extent that leaders comply with God's law. In the Old Testament, this was the Mosaic Law. In the New Testament, it can be Jesus's new commandment to love God with one's whole being and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Matthew 22:36-40). For a Christian, even non-Christian leaders should be held to the standard of behaving in ways that reflect the dignity and respect everyone deserves. Additionally, both orthodoxy and orthopraxy are required. In secular terms, this means it is not enough for leaders to just espouse the company's party line. They must also live in a way that genuinely supports the company's mission and all its stakeholders.

People are needed to hold other people accountable, but that to which leaders ought to be accountable should not be primarily another person. As has been shown (Ecclesiastes 5:8), it is too easy for alliances between those in power to be corrupted. Instead, at a general level, leaders should be held accountable to the Golden Rule. More specifically, a company needs to unambiguously define standards for its leaders and the methods by which they will be held accountable to those standards. Profitability and cost control are two obvious standards, but there must also be clear standards for how things like cost control and profitability are attained. Valid leadership requires attention to both means and ends. And as more and more companies pursue multiple bottom lines, there should be standards to measure leaders' effects on people and the natural environment. Finally, a simple but strong mechanism for accountability is for all subordinates to formally evaluate their managers and senior management on a regular basis. In responding to the misdeeds of Ravi Zacharias, a recent meeting at the International Conference on Missions proposed these accountability mechanisms: whistleblower protections, independent audits, psychological evaluations of key personnel, and board members who will not look the other way if something appears wrong (Silliman, 2021).

### Be an Accommodating Purist

Hill (2018) coined the term “accommodating purist” as an answer to how Christians should respond to a directive from a boss that, while legal, violates their morals. Faced with this situation, Hill states the employee should not submit to his boss. While Hill acknowledges that submission is appropriate in some relationships, he believes it inappropriately stretches loyalty into servility in an employment relationship. Hill cites the *Summa Theologica*, where Thomas Aquinas limits employers’ authority over employees, especially if a boss expects “indiscreet obedience” from workers (as cited in Hill, 2018, p. 118). Such obedience would require behavior contrary to Scripture and thus should not be undertaken. The employee should neither blindly obey nor aggressively rebel but rather imitate Christ. Imitating Christ in this context means accommodating bosses as neighbors, being generous in morally ambiguous situations, not being paternalistic, and working for creative solutions to dilemmas, the nuances of which Hill describes in detail in his book. Although Hill is primarily concerned with acting ethically in the marketplace, his idea can also apply to responding to a self-serving leader. In short, accommodating purists refuse to compromise the core of their beliefs, but they also try to work diplomatically with those with whom they disagree. David, before he became king, and Daniel provide useful examples of the interpersonal and spiritual finesse required to do this well.

### Trust God, and Exercise Patience and Forbearance

Dealing with self-serving, not just tough, leaders is very difficult. Ultimately, believers must trust in the Lord’s protection just as the prophets and early church leaders did (Psalm 20:7-8; Jude vs. 24). We must be patient as changing a self-serving leader will take a long time, if it will ever occur. Christians must, as in all areas of their lives, also be willing to suffer. Sometimes they are called to endure mistreatment. Speaking up may result in negative personal consequences like a poor performance review, demotion, or termination. While it is very unlikely, a contemporary Christian business person could even lose their life for resisting a self-serving leader. That was the result when John the Baptist called out Herod Antipas for living contrary to God’s law (Matthew 14:1-12) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer stood up to Hitler. Speaking truth to power takes courage and gives no promise of personal reward.

### Leave

If all else fails, then leaving the company may be the only course of action (Hill, 2008). Increased turnover

is a documented consequence of self-serving leadership (Tepper, 2000). Enough turnover can signal the company has a problem. It may also be the only way employees feel they can maintain their dignity. Leaving, however, may not be an option for employees with limited marketability, once again demonstrating the power and destructive effect of the self-serving leader.

### Look in the Mirror and Solicit Honest Feedback

Lastly, we need to ask ourselves if we might be a self-serving leader. The challenge in doing this is that such leaders lack self-awareness; thus, everyone needs unfiltered input about their leadership from others. One does not have to be a full-blown narcissist to lead in self-serving ways. Think of King David, and heaven forbid that we would ever become like the unforgiving debtor of the parable in Matthew 18:21-35. Having been led ourselves by a forgiving, self-sacrificing shepherd named Jesus, may we never refuse to sacrifice for those we lead. Cohee and Voorhies (2021) provide a useful and biblically based method for increasing leadership self-awareness.

## CONCLUSION

Self-serving leadership has been understudied in the Christian business literature. However, Scripture’s description of appropriate versus self-serving shepherds gives us guidance. Christians are called to confront self-serving leadership forcefully but also without rejecting the idea of leadership and authority. This is not at all easy, as first-mate Starbuck and many others finding themselves under the thumb of a self-serving shepherd have found. At the same time, there is hope, even for the self-serving leader, as selfish Zacchaeus’ transformational encounter with Christ demonstrates (Luke 19:1-10).

Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak, and that it is doing God’s service, when it is violating all His laws.

(John Adams letter to Thomas Jefferson,  
Feb. 2, 1816)<sup>1</sup>

### Endnote

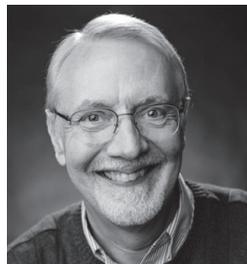
<sup>1</sup> <https://libquotes.com/john-adams/quote/lbj8c8e>

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