

Faithful Followers

A Response to “When Leadership Goes Wrong: Self-Serving Shepherds and Their Followers”

EMILY ROW PREVOST
University of Mary Hardin-Baylor

ABSTRACT: In his article, “When Leadership Goes Wrong: Self-Serving Shepherds and Their Followers,” Dr. Kent Seibert seeks to find appropriate responses for the Christian who is led by a self-serving, and even abusive, leader. The author proposes a number of responses available to organizations and followers with reference to biblical principles. This response provides a critique of Seibert’s article and attempts to provide a framework for selecting between his proposed solutions.

INTRODUCTION

“If you will be a servant to this people today, and will serve them and grant their request, and speak good words to them, then they will be your servants forever” (Elders to King Rehoboam in 1 Kings 12:7 ESV).

References to biblical calls for self-sacrificing leadership often focus solely on the New Testament. However, the wisdom of serving one’s followers is seen early in the biblical narrative. The young King Rehoboam sought counsel as he ascended the throne about what type of leader he should seek to be. He failed to heed the wisdom of the elders, who encouraged him to serve his followers, and this failure led to his untimely death at the hands of his subjects. Not every self-serving leader comes to such an immediate and unfortunate end, but, as Kent Seibert points out in “When Leadership Goes Wrong,” little has been written regarding the scriptural principles for appropriate response when confronted with such leaders.

Seibert paints a picture of self-serving leadership using numerous examples, including Old Testament kings, prophets, and priests. He rightly contrasts the biblical chastisement against the self-serving leader with the commands for good and caring shepherds who look after their followers. In doing so, he demonstrates the biblical imperatives against utilizing positions of power and authority for self-serving gains.

To provide a clear context for his argument, Seibert utilizes the following definition for self-serving leadership, “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.” His definition requires both negative intent and negative outcomes. The limited literature about self-serving leaders does support that these behaviors can have negative outcomes for followers and organizations alike, including reducing employee commitment and satisfaction (Decoster et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2010; Peng et al., 2018,). However, some research indicates that narcissistic CEOs do not generate systematically negative outcomes (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007). To assert that pursuing one’s own interests over those of one’s followers always manifests in abusive behavior and destructive outcomes would be an oversimplification. Seibert acknowledges that self-serving leadership is complex but maintains use of this definition given the frequent negative outcomes.

In identifying the characteristics that constitute self-serving leadership, Seibert refers to the work in the dark triad of personality consisting of Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism (O’Boyle et al., 2012). In constructing his argument, Seibert does not devote attention to the distinctions between narcissistic personality trait, narcissistic personality disorder, and self-serving behavior. Though beyond the scope of this particular response, it is important to note the substantial debate that exists regarding the correlation of measurements of trait narcissism with pathological narcissism or narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) as defined by the DSM-5 (Miller et al., 2018). Further, some research seems to indicate that narcissism is associated with helping others

(Chen et al., 2021) and that narcissism may even benefit the organization or group (Maccoby, 2003; Pfeffer, 2021). Seibert acknowledges that moderate levels of narcissism are positively associated with effectiveness as a leader, which may weaken his point that self-serving leadership results in abusive and destructive outcomes. The positive association with effectiveness further points to a strong reason for the continued success of self-serving leaders.

Having woven together the contemporary leadership literature, Seibert moves on to address the core issue of the article: the appropriate responses to self-serving leaders. Utilizing biblical guidelines, particularly in the New Testament, the article lays out several key principles, including the priority to follow God above human leaders (1 John 1:10), to test the legitimacy of leaders who claim to bring truth (2 John 1:7), and to bring leaders to account for wrongdoing (1 Timothy 5:19-20).

Seibert utilizes these scriptural examples to propose appropriate contemporary responses to the self-serving leader. His responses are intended for leaders, organizations, and followers, which may or may not all have the ability to implement some of the proposed solutions. This presents an opportunity to more clearly investigate which responses are available to different constituencies when responding to a self-serving leader. His approaches bear great resemblance to Wisse and Russe's (2022) "Shift, Suppress, Sever" approach to dealing with dark leadership and add clarity to the roots of these solutions in biblical principles.

Seibert rightly suggests that care should be taken in hiring. Few followers have the luxury of having any influence in the selection of their managers and supervisors. He further provides a number of suggestions from Langberg's (2020) work in *Redeeming Power*, providing appropriate channels for reporting and challenging inappropriate leader behavior. These mechanisms are meaningful for curtailing self-serving behavior among leaders, which may be detrimental to followers and the company as a whole but may not be available for followers to enact on their own. The scriptural examples given are within the context of the church, where followers have much more freedom to provide accountability to their leaders as co-laborers in Christ.

Seibert does provide several appropriate responses specifically available to the follower. When selecting from Seibert's provided responses, the follower may have to wrestle with the timeliness and appropriateness of approaches as diverse as praying for patience, speaking truth to power, and leaving the situation. The biblical example in the book of Exodus demonstrating various

responses of God's people to the self-serving Pharaoh and Egyptians in power (Exodus 1:8-14) provides clear examples of appropriate utilization of the responses:

Stay and Pray

For the follower who is not being asked to perform immoral acts, cry out to God (or in Seibert's terms, pray for, and against, your leaders). This may be the most appropriate action for the follower without power, such as the Israelite people under oppression by Pharaoh—praying for God's deliverance when they have no power of their own. All the while they continue to do their work under harsh and even harmful conditions (Exodus 2:23).

While it can be tempting to perceive staying in negative circumstances while praying as only appropriate when a follower lacks other alternatives. Scripture is replete with examples of individuals staying under self-serving leadership, including

- Paul, who stays in jail when the cells are thrown wide-open (Acts 16:25-40);
- Joseph, who chooses to work for Pharaoh, who has previously killed those with whom he disagrees (Genesis 40-41); and
- Jesus, who submits silently to the accusations of the self-serving religious leadership (Matthew 26:50-54, 59-63).

Given that submission to God's ultimate authority is the primary call of the Christian believer, there may be times when staying and praying are the ultimate act of obedience, even if foolish by all other measures.

Respectfully Resist

When the follower is asked to do something immoral, however, it may be an indicator that it is time to select Seibert's option to be an accommodating purist. The midwives in the Exodus story demonstrate this behavior as they refuse to kill the Hebrew babies when commanded to do so (Exodus 1:15-20). Other biblical examples provide additional guidance for the appropriate timing of being an accommodating purist. Peter and John openly defy leadership when it is in direct opposition to God's instruction (Acts 5:29). Jesus rejects the teachings of the religious leaders to do what is right in healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6). Even in these instances, due respect is still provided to the leader in power.

Take Direct Action

Moses's initial response to the abusive power demonstrated by the Egyptians provides a cautionary

tale in resistance to self-serving leadership. In an angry response, he kills an Egyptian (Exodus 2:11-15). While anger was well within the appropriate response of a follower of God to the injustice witnessed, taking action that would harm another should not be taken lightly.

Seibert places Dietrich Bonhoeffer among those who planned to take direct action. However it is unclear in the article which of Bonhoeffer's activities Seibert is referring to. Bonhoeffer took a number of approaches against Hitler's leadership, including non-violent resistance and fleeing. The reader may assume Seibert is referring to the ultimate choice to participate in an assassination plot. Bonhoeffer himself makes no attempt to rationalize this decision in his later writings, including Bonhoeffer (2012) and Bonhoeffer (2015). Bonhoeffer's range of responses to self-serving leadership provides Christians with an opportunity to reflect on the complex moral dilemmas involved when contemplating approaches to direct action.

There are a number of ways for the Christian to take direct action without resorting to an extreme option. Moses later in life offers a more reasoned, but direct, confrontation against Pharaoh by pleading for the needs of the Hebrew people (Exodus 5:1-3). A number of biblical examples provide evidence of direct confrontation of self-serving behavior with the aim to restore, rather than to undermine or eliminate, the leader. These include the prophet Nathan with King David (2 Samuel 12) and Paul confronting Peter (Galatians 2:11-14). In both cases, the self-serving behavior of the leader was harmful to other followers. Confrontation in love may well be the most difficult and risky of the options available to the follower. Confrontation of a leader and the challenges to a follower could be a worthy topic for further development in reflecting upon approaches to self-serving leaders.

Leave

Moses and the Hebrew people, when given opportunity, take Seibert's final suggestion for dealing with a self-serving leader: they escape. When unable to continue to provide respectful resistance, respond directly, or endure further, an exit may well be the most appropriate response.

Seibert notes that Hill (2018) argues against any application of scriptural passages written in light of a master-slave relationship. While certainly the context of the New Testament writings within the Roman first-century context limits direct equivalencies and should certainly not be utilized as evidence in support of slavery, applications can always be drawn based on underlying

biblical principles. Additional scriptural passages, with further development, may provide a framework for determining appropriate action (or non-action) while trusting God for a response (Fee & Stuart, 2014).

The biblical guidelines for slaves and masters provide guidance that followers, even those in abusive situations, should respect their leaders (1 Timothy 6:1), serve with sincerity of heart (Ephesians 6:5-6), and be committed as if working for the Lord (Colossians 3:22-25). While all of the passages are written within the framework of the household codes of the time, the guidelines for showing respect, hard work, and sincerity to those in power are not to be ignored entirely. Self-evaluation by the follower of how faithfully he or she is able to abide by these guidelines may well offer insight regarding whether to stay, respectfully resist, take direct action, or leave.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Emily Prevost currently serves as the associate provost for academic engagement at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor. In this role, she serves as the SACSCOC institutional liaison, coordinates institutional assessment, and oversees student support services.

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