

Beyond Serving Others: Continual Self-Sacrifice as Normative Christianity

Biblical Perspectives – May 2008

Louis F. Morgan
Regent University
Virginia Beach VA, USA

One of the basic tenants of the Christian faith is the act of becoming a servant, both to Christ and to others. Followers of Christ are reminded that He “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45, NIV). In addition, Christ acknowledges the greatest commandment is to love God with all that one possesses, including mind, body and soul, and to love his or her neighbor as one loves his or her own self (Mat. 22:37-39). For Christians seeking to influence those around them for Christ, it seems plausible that they, in fact, are leading others through their loving service to God and others, especially considering Northouse’s (2004) definition of a leader as one who “influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3). However, when focusing on contemporary leadership theories, an argument can be made that the normative lifestyle for followers of Christ, as explained in scripture, actually requires more than servant leadership. Instead, it seems that Christians should be self-sacrificing servants. To gain a clearer understanding of the appropriate leadership role Christ’s followers should model, it is important to consider the main characteristics of servant leadership and self-sacrificing leadership.

Sacrificing Leadership

Servant leadership and self-sacrificial leadership alone are theories devoid of spiritual implications. It is only when the foundational reasoning for such actions is explained that one can recognize the spiritual applications congruent with these theories.

Servant Leadership

The concept of servant leadership emerged through the theoretical work of Greenleaf (1977), who proposes servant leaders are those whose primary concern is serving others. Greenleaf suggests servant leaders initially function in a serving role, perhaps because of an innate desire, and then chose to lead. The goal of leading as a servant is to help those being served to “grow as

persons...[and] become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 7).

Wong and Davey (2007) explain that servant leadership “puts workers rather than shareholders at the center of concentric circles; and it motivates workers primarily through creating a caring and supportive workplace rather than through individual incentive systems” (p. 3). Spears (1998) suggests it is demonstrated by ten characteristics, namely (a) listening, (b) empathy, (c) healing, (d) awareness, (e) persuasion, (f) conceptualization, (g) foresight, (h) stewardship, (h) commitment to the growth of people, and (i) building community. In addition, May and Whittington (2003) explain that affirmation of the uniqueness of God’s design and gifting in the lives of others is a key element of servant leadership, especially in helping others see their own responsibility to become servants to God and others.

Greenleaf (1977) also explains that servant leadership must occur within the context of relationship and community, which is congruent with Christian practice as outlined in scripture. Crippen (2006) notes Greenleaf (1977) was a Quaker, which suggests an understanding of scripture and spiritual principles. However, Spears (1996) explains the concept for servant leadership theory, while perhaps congruent with Christian practice, actually evolved as a non-religious philosophy from inspiration he received when reading the novel *Journey to the East* by Herman Hesse.

Nonetheless, such passages focusing on humility, compassion, and the need to consider and even prefer others over one’s own self (i.e., Phil. 2:1-3; Col. 3:12-13; 1 Pet. 5:5-6) reflect a communal nature that is understood in servant leadership. Standish (2007) alludes to this type of servitude when describing what he calls humble leadership, especially when noting “[w]hen we lead from a sense of humility, willingly putting aside our own motivations and desires in favor of God’s call, we create the context in which people are more willing to put aside their own will to seek God’s will” (p. 4). Herman and Marlowe (2005) concur that “one’s meaning is found in the values of humility and faithful servitude” (p. 175).

While each of the aforementioned concepts of servant leadership are congruent with Christ’s example as illustrated in scripture, they seem limited in fulfilling the extent to which Christ’s followers are to emulate His actions. Therefore, another approach for serving God and others that extends the servant’s role seems necessary for Christ’s followers to appropriately fulfill His admonitions to endure hardship (2 Tim. 2:3), rejoice when others demean through persecution (Mat. 5:11-12; Rom. 5:3), and to acknowledge God’s strength in one’s personal suffering (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Self-sacrificing Leadership

Self-sacrificing leadership has received greater attention in leadership studies in recent years, although its application, just as that of servant leadership, has existed throughout the ages. Choi and Mai-Dalton (1998) note the development of self sacrificing leadership from the work of other leadership theorists (e.g., Tead, 1935; Klapp, 1968; Greenleaf, 1977; House, 1977; Goode, 1978; Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; and Conger, 1989). Choi and Mai-Dalton define self-sacrificial leadership as one’s voluntary action of “abandoning or postponing personal interests, privileges, and welfare”

(1998, ¶28). Matteson and Irving (2006) concur that “[s]elf-sacrificing leadership occurs when a leader forfeits one or more professional or personal advantages for the sake of followers, the organization, or a mission” (p. 1306). Matteson and Irving propose that self-sacrificing leadership is positioned on a continuum somewhere between the transformational and servant styles, with servant leadership higher on the continuum than transformational leadership. In addition, they suggest, along with Choi and Mai-Dalton (1998), that self-sacrificial leadership may include a single occurrence of depriving oneself of a personal advantage for the benefit of another, instead of a continual pattern. Such perceptions seem to limit the importance and impact of self-sacrificial leadership.

I propose self-sacrificial leaders operate as an extension beyond servant leadership. For example, within servant leadership there is no need for personal sacrifice; the act of serving others is sufficient. Self-sacrificing leaders, however, are likely to choose actions that result in a loss of personal gratification in preference of those whom they are leading and an effort to model appropriate behavior before them (Matteson & Irving, 2006). Therefore, it seems plausible that self-sacrificial leadership, while sharing some similarities with servant leadership, actually moves beyond servant leadership. In addition, while Choi and Mai-Dalton (1998) explain self-sacrificial leadership as being either a one-time occurrence or continuous event, it seems that individuals seeking to follow Christ’s example would be inclined to view self-sacrifice as a lifestyle, rather than an occasional event.

Christ’s Call to Self-Sacrificial Service

In order to determine how early followers of Christ understood their role as His servants, one needs only consult scripture. Especially for leaders, it is important to have a proper perspective of self with God at the center of one’s actions, which is possible for followers of Christ through proper study and application of scripture, particularly regarding servanthood and self-sacrifice.

In scripture Christ is portrayed as the supreme servant of humanity, specifically when He is baptized and the voice of God from heaven proclaims Jesus as “my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17) and Jesus, as the Son of God, is not exalted in an aristocratic manner, but instead reveals His identity as an humble servant to others. In addition, Christ’s servitude extends to a sacrificial level when He offers Himself as the atonement for the sins of all humanity (John 19:16-18). Therefore, realizing that no servant of Christ can be above his or her master but should expect the same level of persecution and self-sacrifice as did Christ (John 15:20), it seems that servant leadership alone is deficient.

The Apostle Paul explains the importance of self-sacrifice in his pastoral letters, specifically to the Romans when he explains that the believers’ act of worship includes offering their bodies as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1). In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul proclaims that followers of Christ are to be “imitators of God...as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:1-2). Jesus Himself admonished His followers that the way to true life is to serve one another, and even better is to live in self-sacrifice as a slave (Mat. 20:26-27), thus suggesting that sacrificial living is an action beyond simple servitude.

As a result, it seems practical that continual self-sacrifice in loving service to God and others should be the normal lifestyle for followers of Christ, particularly those who seek to influence others for Him. To this end, I propose that continual self-sacrifice to God and others is one's supreme act of worship and, in reality, a lifestyle of simple obedience to the mission of Christ.

References

- Bass, B.M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. New York: Free Press.
- Burns, J.M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Choi, Y., and R.R., Mai-Dalton. (1998). On the leadership function of self-sacrifice. *Leadership Quarterly*, 9(4), 475-501.
- Conger, J.A. (1989). *The charismatic leader: Behind the mystique of exceptional leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Crippen, C. (2006). Three Manitoba pioneer women: A legacy of servant-leadership. *Manitoba History*, 53, 11-21.
- Goode, W.J. (1978). *The celebration of heroes: Prestige as a social control system*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- Greenleaf, R.K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Herman, D.V., and Marlowe, M. (2005). Modeling meaning in life: The teacher as servant leader. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 14(3), 175-178.
- House, R. J. (1977). A 1976 theory of charismatic Leadership. In J.G. Hunt, & L.L. Larson (Eds.), *Leadership: The cutting edge* (pp. 189-201). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Klapp, O.E. (1968). *Symbolic leaders: Public dramas and public men*. Chicago: Minerva Press.
- Matteson, J.A., and Irving, J.A. (2006). Exploring servant versus self-sacrificial leadership: A research proposal for assessing the commonalities and distinctions of of two follower-oriented leadership theories. *2006 Proceedings of the American Society of Business and Behavioral Sciences*, 13(1), 1305-1319.
- May, R.C., and Whittington, J.L. (2003). *The gospel of affirmation: A model for spiritual leadership*. Academy of Management Annual Meeting. August 2003, Seattle, WA.
- Northouse, P.G.. (2004). *Leadership theory and practice*. (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Spears, L. (1996). Reflections on Robert K. Greenleaf and servant-leadership. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, 17(7), 33-35.
- Spears, L. (1998). *Insights on leadership: Service, stewardship, spirit, and servant-leadership*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Standish, N.G. (2007). *Humble leadership: Being radically open to God's guidance and grace*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute.
- Tead, O. (1935). *The art of leadership*. New York: Whittlesey House.
- Wong, P.T.P., and Davey, D. (2007). Best practices in servant leadership. *Servant Leadership Research Roundtable*, School of Global Leadership and Entrepreneurship, Regent University. July 2007, Virginia Beach, VA.