A Study of Peter as a Model for Servant Leadership
Kevin Leahy

This article examines Peter as a model for leadership, based on his words and actions in the Gospel of John, the Book of Acts, and the Epistle of 1 Peter. From his turning point as a “shepherd of God’s flock” in John 21, to his development as the committed leader of the Book of Acts, to his final emergence as the humble “co-elder” in his Epistle of 1 Peter, he exhibits characteristics of charismatic, transformational, and servant leadership. The author reviews Peter’s growth throughout his ministry, comparing his leadership style to these modern definitions of leadership. Using inner texture socio-rhetorical analysis of 1 Peter 5, the author develops a theory regarding Peter as a model for servant leadership. Finally, lessons in servant leadership are suggested based on a reflection on Jesus as a model for Peter and on the life and growth of Peter as a leader of Christ’s Church.

Peter as a Model for Leadership

Peter’s breakfast with Jesus by the Sea of Tiberius reflects a turning point for Peter as a leader – a shepherd of God’s flock (John 21:17). Once cowering from the threat of discovery, Peter emerges with renewed conviction as the leader of thousands of new followers in the Book of Acts. His effectiveness as a leader is evident in his charismatic style, his conviction for his beliefs, and the resulting conversion of thousands during his early ministry. He challenges the religious and social norms of the time as a witness to Christ’s life, suffering, death, and resurrection. He also exhibits a humble spirit in addressing the elders and followers of the churches of Asia Minor in 1 Peter 5.1 His instructions to the elders of the church to “Be shepherds of God’s flock” (v. 2) is reflective of Jesus’ charge of him at the turning point in his own leadership growth. A close examination of his style and focus as “co-elder” of the early church, through inner texture socio-rhetorical analysis2 of 1 Peter 5, reveals his servant leadership style near the end of his ministry. Leadership lessons can be learned through careful reflection on Peter’s growth as a leader throughout his ministry and by comparing his leadership style to modern definitions of charismatic, transformational and servant leadership.
“Feed my Sheep” - A Transformed Leader

Throughout the Gospels, Peter’s interactions with Jesus and the disciples reflect a leader who is impulsive, ambitious, self-assertive, and quick to commit without fully understanding the meaning of Jesus’ words or actions. Peter exhibits the character of an outspoken leader of the disciples, willing to challenge Jesus actions and teachings (John 13:6). Although quick to commit to Jesus’ challenges (John 13:9), he is unsteady in demonstrating his commitment during Jesus’ time of suffering (John 18:15, 25). However, Peter is transformed in John 21 from the ambitious, self-motivated, impulsive, and inconsistent follower of Jesus, to the fully committed, charismatic leader of Christ’s Church.

Peter jumps from his boat upon recognizing Jesus by the Sea of Tiberius in Galilee (John 21:7). He shares a breakfast of fish and bread with his teacher and is challenged by Jesus, having once denied Him in His critical time of suffering (John 18:15-19). Reflective of Peter’s denial of Christ, Jesus asks Peter to respond three times to the question, “Do you love me?”. With each response, Jesus challenges Peter to care for His followers and to follow His Master stating, “Feed my lambs.” (v. 15), “Take care of my sheep.” (v. 16), “Feed my sheep.” (v. 17), and finally, “Follow me!” (v.19). (NIV)

To follow Jesus meant more than forming a deep relationship for Peter. Following Jesus was a commitment to the “work of shepherding” and the works of Jesus. The posture of “shepherding” most aligns Jesus’ leadership challenge with our modern definition of servant leadership. The posture of “following” keeps Peter and all leaders in close relationship with Christ. Peter’s commitment to serving others and following Jesus is evident in the changes we see in him after his transformation by the Sea of Tiberius. In the Book of Acts he begins to “take up the works” of Christ with charismatic flair, committed to teaching, healing, and converting new followers.

The Leader of the Early Church

Through empowerment that comes from the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4), Peter’s characteristics of fearfulness and inconsistency are replaced by confidence, conviction and compassion (Acts 2:14-4:31). Peter inspires crowds of thousands, bringing new believers into the faith, healing the blind, and standing up to the leaders that he once feared. He understood the risks he was taking as he took up the “works of Christ” preaching in public, healing the sick, converting followers. Clearly, Peter is focused on bringing Christ’s message to transform the world, without consideration for his own safety.

Peter is challenged by God to reconsider one of the fundamental paradigms of the early Jewish Christian leaders; conformance to the Laws of Moses and the requirement for circumcision (Acts 10: 9-16). Although Jesus’ Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) was a challenge to the apostles to preach the Gospel to all nations, Peter carried the message of Christ only to Jews, Samaritans, and Jewish proselytes. Peter, the apostles, and the leaders of the church, were affected by their own religious traditions and beliefs. They accepted new Gentile believers as members of God’s new church of Christians with the condition of conformance to Jewish law as proselytes by being circumcised and by keeping the Law of Moses. However, God had other plans in mind for the future of His church and introduced Peter to a new paradigm in a dream (Act 10: 9-16). This dream was direction for Peter to look first to believers’ hearts and not to their compliance with Jewish practices.

Cornelius, “a centurion” and “a devout man and one who feared God” (NKJV, Acts 10:1), had been directed to seek out Peter through a vision from God. In response to God’s direction, Peter was ready and
willing to accept Cornelius as a member of Christ’s church, without consideration of his adherence first to Jewish law. “But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.” (NKJV, v. 28), said Peter, meeting with Cornelius, his family, and his close friends. God’s challenge of both Peter (vv. 9-16) and Cornelius (vv. 3-7), resulted in the first “official” Gentile member of the new Christian community through baptism (v.48) and through the acceptance by the apostles (11:1-18). With this act of leadership, Peter exhibits a fundamental characteristic of servant leadership; the priority of the follower over the organization. Peter answers the call to shepherd all believers, even those professing their faith without the condition of first conforming to Jewish laws or practices. 

Challenges of the Early Church

With the introduction of these new believers into the church, new religious and social pressures are imposed on believers and leaders alike. Near the end of Peter’s life and ministry, Peter’s “voice” is heard again in his Epistles to the churches of Asia Minor. Peter’s servant leadership character and his concern for these suffering believers are evident throughout the Letter of 1 Peter.

The early believers are well aware of the threat of persecution of other believers in and around the Roman Empire. Nero blames the early Christians for the burning of Rome, encouraging the belief that these early Christians were enemies of his empire. In addition to concerns over the threat of Nero, the Gentile believers are fearful of the persecution and ridicule from their neighbors, friends, and family. It is common for the early Christians to be viewed with suspicion or concern by their former friends and their neighbors as they pulled away from social events, civic activities and any function or tradition involving idolatry. Gentiles of the time believe that the wrath of their “gods” would be aimed at those who deny their deity and pledge their faith to God. As a result, these early Christians are viewed as a potential threat to the wellbeing of all those who know them. The intended audience of 1 Peter are these believers who find themselves marginalized; outcasts from normal society without political rights, harassed by their neighbors and former community associates, and often encouraged or tempted to abandon their newly found faith.

The letter of 1 Peter amplifies a four-fold strategy of encouragement and guidance for these early believers; 1) recognition of honor in their connection with Jesus, 2) willingness to suffer societal insults in Christ’s name as a meaningful experience, 3) guidance regarding a code of conduct toward non-believers and each other, and 4) a focus on attaining the long term benefits for their belief and suffering. In the closing chapter, Peter addresses the “elders” (v.1) and “young men” (v.5) of the churches of Asia Minor, against this backdrop of struggle and ridicule. Peter is focused on shepherding his own flock and teaching the church leaders to be shepherds themselves. His words are meant to help these believers, leaders and followers alike, to endure the pressures and negative reactions of their neighbors and even their own family members. These leaders and their followers are victims of the social pressures and control methods of ridicule and prejudice, marginalization by friends and neighbors attempting, in the best of circumstances, to restore them to their previous societal conformity.

Peter first instructions are for the elders, echoing the very same challenge given to him by Jesus at the Sea of Tiberius; “Be shepherds of God’s flock” (NIV, v.2). With the discussion that follows, Peter addresses the new followers, espousing the very same teachings that he came to practice as a disciple of Christ, encouraging them to stand fast against persecution. The character that Peter exhibits through his message for the early leaders and followers of the church is consistent with our understanding of servant leadership. The details of his
message and his servant leadership character can be better understood through inner textural methods of socio-rhetorical analysis.  

**Inner Textural Analysis of 1 Peter 5 – Overview**

The fifth chapter of 1 Peter can be divided into two major segments, each with an opening-middle-closing texture. The first segment (1 Peter 5: 1-4) begins with Peter addressing the elders of the church. In the second segment (1 Peter 5: 5-10) he addresses the followers within the early church, closing with a message to all believers. Within each of these opening-middle-closing textural segments, a progressive texture and pattern evolves with an initial emphasis on the individual posture of the believer with a progression emphasizing their role toward each other, their role in relation to God, and their resistance to the influence of the devil. Additionally, a progressive texture and pattern develops regarding God’s help and hope for His flock. This is illustrated in Table 1.

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<td>eternal glory, restore you, make you strong, firm and steadfast</td>
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Table 1 - Progressive/Repetitive Texture and Pattern of 1 Peter 5: 1-10 (NIV).

- a. Progressive texture and pattern of posture of elders and followers
- b. Progressive texture and pattern of God’s Actions
Peter’s Authority and Humility

The first segment of 1 Peter 5 opens with Peter referring to the elders of the church, not just as an apostle and witness of Christ, but as a “co-elder” (v.1). Peter addresses the leaders of the church as “presbyteros” meaning “old men.” However, Peter did not use this term to refer simply to their age, but to show respect and recognition for their positions as leaders of their household churches. Peter refers to himself as “sympresbyteros” meaning “fellow elder.” In this reference, Peter establishes a “collegiality” with the elders and demonstrates a level of humility uncharacteristic of Peter of the Gospels. Peter is equating himself to the elders, humbling himself in his role as a “co-elder”, and acknowledging the maturity of the faith of the elders. As J. R. Michaels explains in “St Peter’s Passion: The Passion Narrative in 1 Peter”, Peter does not separate himself as a “solitary authority figure”, who witnessed Christ’s life, passion, and resurrection, but instead seeks to unite himself with them. He and they share together both in testifying to “the sufferings of the Christ” and in awaiting "the glory to be revealed.” In so doing, Peter exhibits a key trait of a servant leader, humility with the posture of serving.

Peter’s Message to the Church Leaders

Peter’s message to the elders in 1 Peter 5:1-4 is simple; they are to be shepherds, serving those they oversee as stewards of God’s flock, modeling the “Chief Shepherd” for their followers who will receive God’s help and hope in their faithfulness to Him in their suffering. The middle segment of this text (vv.2-3) establishes the role of the elders as shepherds of God’s flock and defines the character of an elder. The beginning of a progressive pattern emerges as Peter first defines the outward responsibilities of the elder as: 1) an overseer, 2) a shepherd, 3) a servant, and 4) a steward of God’s flock (vv. 2-3). He then focuses on the inward motivation of the elders, placing a priority on their willingness and eagerness to serve without concern over compensation for their efforts (v.2). This establishes the foundation of servant leadership upon which the elder should build, grow, and shepherd their flock.

Peter transitions to an outward emphasis again in 1 Peter 5:3, challenging the elders to be examples for their flock. Peter is emphasizing the role of the church leaders as models of Christ (5:2-3), giving special consideration to those who suffer (5:1) and are regularly pressured to return to their former life-styles and beliefs (5:9-11). Finally, the closing texture of this first segment places emphasis on Christ as the “Chief Shepherd” and on the glory that will be the eternal reward of the faithful elders upon Christ’s return (v. 4).

Peter’s Message to the Followers

In the opening address to the “young men” of the church, Peter emphasizes the humble and submissive posture the followers are to take in their relation to the elders of the church community. Peter’s message to those followers who have the responsibility to minister to others is to minister under the guidance, authority, and modeling of the elders. His statement “in the same way” (v.5) emphasizes the posture of serving, implying “as the elder serves.” This not only brings to mind the elders as models for humility and service, but causes the “young men” to consider all of the desirable characteristics of the elders outlined by Peter earlier in his letter (vv.2-4).
Peter’s Message to All Believers

The middle segment of this passage (vv.5-10) develops a progressive texture and pattern focused on the desired posture of both follower and elder; 1) a focus on outward submissiveness of followers towards elders (v.5a), 2) a humble posture of elders and followers toward each other (v.5b), 3) a posture of humility (v.6) and trust (v.7) toward God, and 4) an outward posture of readiness, self-control, and steadfast resistance toward the devil (vv.8-9) with 5) a sense of community with other suffering believers (v.9). Peter emphasizes the spiritual battles and hardships of the early believers, highlighting the importance of rigorous obedience to the standards set forth by Christ with unwavering faith. As this textural progression continues Peter provides assurance of God’s response to all believers, encouraging a posture of humility and submissiveness (vv. 5, 6, 7, 10). God responds to the believers’ humility and submissiveness by “giving grace to the humble” (v.5) and “lifting them up” (v.6). He cares for those who “cast their anxiety on Him” (v. 7). This caring extends to the suffering that the follower undergoes, and encourages them to stay alert and to resist the devil (v. 8).

In the closing segment of this text, Peter refers to their suffering “for a little while” (v.10), placing their time of suffering in the context of the blessings of eternity. He assures both leaders and followers alike that God’s response will make them “strong, firm and steadfast” (v.10) against the power of the “roaring lion” (v.8), and will bring them into “His eternal glory” (v.10). This final statement reflects Peter’s character of servant leadership, emphasizing trust in God, with a vision for the future benefits of steadfast commitment to a belief in Christ and the conviction of the belief in the ultimate reward for their near term suffering.

Leadership Lessons from Peter’s Life and Ministry

As we examine the initial transformation of Peter in the Gospel of John, we gain insight into the struggles and human weakness of leaders who take their eyes off Christ and focus on “self”. We observe Peter in his early relationship with Jesus as self-assertive, inconsistent, and impulsive. However Jesus, who is more than a teacher to Peter and the disciples, transforms Peter. We recognize Jesus as the model of servant leadership, affecting Peter by imparting a vision for his future. Jesus tells Peter, “Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go” (NIV, John 21: 18). Jesus provides a vivid image of Peter’s future and restores him to his former position as the “rock” (KJV, John 1:42) by acknowledging his renewed commitment as Christ’s follower and servant. We see the transformation of Peter through Jesus’ forgiveness. In this act of forgiveness, we see Peter demonstrating humility and resilience in his relationship with Jesus. Peter not only accepts the correction that comes from the probing question “Do you love me?”, but he is transformed in the interaction through Jesus’ words “Follow me.” and through Jesus’ projection into Peter’s future.

We take away another leadership lesson from Jesus’ interaction with Peter. Projecting the future through the eyes of a follower, who might otherwise not have complete awareness or faith in their own abilities, is an effective motivational technique for a leader. The effect is to affirm and raise the level of the follower, multiplying the resulting impact on the organization through the subsequent words and actions of the follower. We see Peter using this same approach, in 1 Peter 5, when he addresses the struggling leaders and followers of the early church. Peter writes, “And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast” (1 Peter 5:10). Peter has learned a valuable leadership lesson through his own experiences with Christ.
We also see Peter’s charismatic character in his sermons and the effects of the Holy Spirit in the conversion of thousands of new believers in the Book of Acts. In our modern definition of charismatic leadership, we see the effect that Peter’s charisma has on raising the energy and commitment of new followers. The result is tremendous growth in the early church and action on the part of both church leaders and followers that go beyond expectation. Peter exhibits the characteristics of dominance, competence, confidence, and strong values, typical of a charismatic leader. We might also consider Peter’s style characteristic our understanding of transformational leadership, with his emphasis on the transformation of early believers, the formalization of the church leadership, and growth of the church organization. However, when we consider the differences and similarities of transformational leaders and servant leaders, we conclude that Peter ultimately demonstrates the character and motivation of a servant leader. It is clear in Peter’s acceptance of the Gentiles into the church, that Peter places the highest value on serving his followers over that of satisfying the organization, even when the organization may not be in complete agreement with the needs and desires of the individuals. Stone states this well;

“[T]he servant leader is one who focuses on his or her followers. Servant leaders do not have particular affinity for the abstract corporation or organization; rather, they value the people who constitute the organization. This is not an emotional endeavor but rather an unconditional concern for the well-being of those who form the entity.”

The final lesson we learn regarding servant leadership is found in 1 Peter 5. Peter’s message to the church leaders is one of a posture of humility with an emphasis on their role as servant leaders and shepherds of God’s flock, “ever mindful of the fact that the flock is not theirs to dominate but God’s (cf. v. 2a) and that it is God who has "allotted" these sheep to their charge (v. 3).” As shepherds, they are to care for their followers, motivated out of a sincere desire to serve, modeling Christ in every way. Just as Peter was called by Christ to “Feed my sheep.” and “Follow Me.”, they are to take up the work of shepherding and the works of Jesus.

Conclusion

We must focus on Peter’s primary motivation when developing conclusions regarding Peter’s primary style of leadership throughout his development as a leader. In so doing, we recognize Peter as a model for servant leadership. We also see how Christ can shape the life of a normal leader, one with characteristics of charisma, enthusiasm, and vision. By forgetting “self” and focusing instead on our followers, we too take the first step toward servant leadership. Through the sincere motivation and desire to serve, we maintain the proper posture as shepherds and stewards of our followers. In Peter, we see his growth as a servant leader, as he addressed organizational challenges and kept his followers as the highest priority. We can learn from Peter as we face our own organizational challenges in balancing the needs of our followers and the needs of our organization, ideally seeking alignment of the two but placing the needs of the follower first. Finally, we recognize that Peter transfers his legacy and the legacy of Christ in the message to the elders and followers of God’s church. In this letter from Peter, we see a model for servant leadership and recognize the importance of mentoring our own leaders to develop their character as servants of their followers.
About the Author

Kevin Leahy is a Doctoral student studying Strategic Leadership with the School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship, Regent University.
End Notes