



INTRODUCING THE CONCEPT OF LEADER SERVANTSHIP AS DEMONSTRATED BY JESUS CHRIST

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Servant leadership has been regarded as a transformative approach to leadership because it places service to others at the center of influence. However, a reflective biblical analysis of its application proposes the concept of “leader servanthood” as the inward servant identity of the leader. This leader servant concept is not in any sense a rival theory to servant leadership or a leader-first claim to authority. Drawing on reflective qualitative inquiry from a six-month Africa Servant Leadership Development Institute (ASLEAD) certificate experience, relevant servant leadership literature, and biblical texts from the *King James Bible*, this paper argues that leader servanthood under divine submission precipitates motives, humility, love, integrity, and the accountability that sustain authentic service. The discussion distinguishes outward servant leadership behaviors from the inner posture that purifies and stabilizes those behaviors. It further demonstrates, through the example of Jesus Christ, that legitimate Christian leadership is strengthened rather than diminished when the leader remains consciously submitted to God and committed to serving others. Leader servanthood does not mean abandoning leadership to become passive or subordinate. It means exercising genuine leadership authority through humility, service, stewardship, and accountability to God and to those being led. The article concludes that leader servanthood can be used as a careful conceptual lens for demonstrating Christ’s leadership service practice in the Church, organizations, and community contexts.

Keywords: Jesus Christ, humility, servanthood, servant leadership, biblical leadership, mentorship

Servant leadership, popularized by Robert K. Greenleaf, refers to leadership in which the desire to serve precedes the desire to lead and in which the needs, growth, and flourishing of followers receive priority over the leader's personal ambition (Greenleaf, 1977). This model challenges the traditional power pyramid by presenting the leader as one who shares power, builds trust, develops people, and uses authority for the good of others rather than for self-promotion. Contemporary scholarship has associated servant leadership with ethical influence, follower development, community

building, trust, and positive organizational outcomes (Eva et al., 2019; Sendjaya et al., 2008; Spears, 2004).

In Christian thought, servant leadership is especially compelling because it reflects the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. Jesus taught that greatness is expressed through service and declared that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve (*King James Bible*, 1769/2017, Mark 10:45). He also washed the disciples' feet and instructed them to follow his example (John 13:14–15). These biblical foundations show that leadership is not weakened by humility; rather, leadership becomes morally credible when authority is exercised through service, love, and obedience to God.

At the same time, the language of servant leadership can be misused. Harding (2022), for example, used the phrase “leader servanthship” negatively to describe the danger that a person who claims to be a servant leader may slowly drift into arrogance and demand service from others. This caution is important because the expression can sound like a leader-first formulation if it is not carefully defined. Greenleaf's central insight was that the servant comes first in the leader's identity and motivation, not merely in the leader's public language.

For that reason, this article uses the phrase “leader servanthship” with deliberate caution. It does not propose leader servanthship as a replacement for servant leadership, as an excuse for leader-centered authority, or as a competing theory. Rather, leader servanthship is proposed here as a conceptual descriptor for the leader's inward servant posture. In this article, leader servanthship refers to the leader's sustained commitment to humility, accountability to God, love for people, and willingness to serve before, during, and through the exercise of leadership. The word “leader” names the subject being examined; it does not place the leader above the servant identity that Greenleaf emphasized.

The purpose of this article is therefore to explain how leader servanthship can reinforce servant leadership by focusing attention on the spiritual and moral condition of the person who leads. The article integrates servant leadership scholarship, biblical reflection, Christian leadership writings, and lessons from the author's participation in the ASLEAD servant leadership program. Its contribution lies in clarifying that authentic servant leadership requires more than outward acts of service; it requires an inward conversion of motive so that the leader serves from a genuine servant heart.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This article used a reflective qualitative design that combined autoethnographic reflection, theological reflection, and literature-based analysis. The experiential basis was the author's participation in a six-month Servant Leadership certificate program offered by the Africa Servant Leadership Development Institute (ASLEAD). During the program, the author engaged in journaling, reflective exercises, group learning, and applied leadership activities. These materials provided first-person evidence of how servant leadership concepts were understood, tested, and internalized in practice.

The literature component focused on foundational and contemporary servant leadership scholarship, including Greenleaf (1977), Spears (2004), Sendjaya et al. (2008), Patterson (2003), and Eva et al. (2019). Biblical passages were drawn from the *King James Bible* and cited with common Bible-book abbreviations. Christian leadership

sources, especially Nee (1972), were used to explore the relationship between authority, submission, humility, and service.

Analysis proceeded through reflective integration. First, recurring themes were identified from the author's reflections, including humility, service, motive, accountability, love, stewardship, and submission to divine authority. Second, these themes were compared with servant leadership literature and biblical texts. Third, the emerging concept of leader servanthship was clarified in relation to servant leadership so that it would not be confused with a leader-first distortion of Greenleaf's model. No additional human participants were studied; therefore, formal ethics approval was not required. The account remains limited by its reflective nature, but it offers a conceptually grounded and practice-informed contribution to faith-integrated leadership studies.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AS OUTWARD PRACTICE

Modern servant leadership theory provides a framework of values and behaviors that distinguish it from conventional top-down leadership. Spears (2004) identified listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and community building as central characteristics of servant leaders. Sendjaya et al. (2008) further emphasized service orientation, holistic concern for followers, and moral-spiritual responsibility. These traits show that servant leadership is not weak leadership; it is disciplined leadership directed toward the growth and well-being of others.

Motives are central to this discipline. Leadership is not only about what a leader does but also about why the leader does it. A leader may perform public acts of service while still seeking admiration, control, or reputation. Such behavior imitates servant leadership outwardly but fails to embody it inwardly. Eva et al. (2019) observed that servant leadership depends on leaders who place followers first, act ethically, and build follower development. Patterson (2003) similarly located servant leadership in virtues such as love, humility, altruism, trust, empowerment, and service.

Therefore, a leader's servant behavior must be interpreted alongside the leader's character, consistency, and effect on others. Servant leadership is most credible when followers experience the leader as one who listens, shares power responsibly, develops people, and practices stewardship over resources and authority (Block, 1993). Without that consistency, the language of service becomes rhetorical. With that consistency, servant leadership becomes a reliable pattern of influence that builds trust and community.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION OF LEADER SERVANTSHIP

The proposed concept of leader servanthship begins where servant leadership scholarship already places great emphasis: the servant identity of the leader. It is introduced here not as a separate or superior construct but as a reinforcing conceptual lens. If servant leadership asks how leaders should serve followers, leader servanthship asks what servant posture must be sustained within the leader so that service remains authentic.

For this article, *leader servanthship* is defined as a leader leading and serving at the same time, being sustained by an inward posture of humility, accountability to God,

love for people, and willingness to serve that precedes, purifies, and stabilizes servant leadership behaviors. This definition acknowledges Greenleaf's servant-first principle while focusing specifically on the inner condition of the person who occupies a leadership role. Leaders can serve, but servants cannot lead.

Table 1 clarifies the central claim. Servant leadership has been established in theory and practice. However, leader servanthship identifies the leader who inwardly aims to serve as a leader and not as a servant who wants to lead. It is this inward posture that keeps servant leadership from becoming a technique, rhetoric, or self-serving performance. The expression does not reverse Greenleaf's servant-first order. Instead, it identifies the leader as the person in whom servanthship must be formed and sustained.

Table 1

Comparison of Servant Leadership and Leader Servanthship

Aspect	Servant Leadership	Leader Servanthship
Conceptual status	An established leadership philosophy and practice that prioritizes serving followers and enabling their growth (Greenleaf, 1977).	A proposed reinforcing lens that names the leader's inward servant identity and motive; it is not a rival theory or leader-first claim.
Primary focus	Outward behaviors: listening, empowering, mentoring, stewardship, community building, and service to followers.	Inner posture: humility, love, accountability to God, surrender of ego, and readiness to serve before and while leading.
Guiding question	How should the leader serve followers and the community?	What kind of servant must the leader become so that leadership service remains authentic?
Biblical grounding	Jesus (a leader) washed the disciples' feet and taught them to serve one another (John 13:14–15; Mark 10:45).	Christ (a leader) humbled himself, took the form of a servant, and acted in obedience to the Father (Phil. 2:5–8; John 5:19).
Possible distortion	It may become rhetoric, people-pleasing, or image management if not rooted in character.	It may be misunderstood as leader-first entitlement if the term is not clearly defined.
Reinforcing value	It shows service in visible leadership practice and builds trust among followers.	It strengthens servant leadership by purifying motive and keeping authority accountable to service.

This distinction also answers the concern that leader servanthship may merely repeat servant leadership. The two are inseparable but not identical in emphasis. Servant leadership is visible in what the leader does for others. Leader servanthship focuses on the inward condition from which those actions arise. When the inner posture is absent, outward service can become manipulation. When the inner posture is present, outward service becomes more consistent, humble, and resilient.

JESUS CHRIST AS THE ULTIMATE LEADERSHIP SERVANT MODEL

The life and teaching of Jesus Christ provide the central biblical model for the unity of service and leadership. Jesus (as a leader) repeatedly redefined greatness as service. He taught that whoever desired to be chief should become a servant (Matt. 20:27), and he described his own mission as service and sacrifice (Mark 10:45). These teachings reveal that Christian leadership is not primarily a search for status but a calling to serve under God's authority for the good of others.

John 13 presents one of the clearest demonstrations of this model. On the night of the Last Supper, Jesus, acknowledged as “Lord” and “Master” (leader), washed the disciples' feet and then told them that they also ought to wash one another's feet (John 13:14–15). The act was not a theatrical performance of humility; it was a visible interpretation of divine authority. Jesus knew who he was (a leader), yet he chose the task of a household servant. His service did not erase his leadership; it revealed the character of his leadership: leadership servanthood.

The same pattern appears in Paul's account of Christ's self-emptying. Christ took the form of a servant and humbled himself in obedience (Phil. 2:5–8). This passage provides a strong theological basis for leader servanthood because it links authority, humility, obedience, and service. Jesus' servant posture flowed from his relationship with the Father. He did not act independently for personal honor, but in obedience to the Father's will (John 5:19).

For Christian leaders today, this model means that leadership must be practiced as stewardship. A leader may possess authority, responsibility, and decision-making power, but those gifts are to be exercised under God and for people. Blanchard and Hodges (2005) similarly presented Jesus as the supreme model for leadership shaped by love, humility, and service.

SERVANTHOOD AND LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICAL UNITY

Jesus' model shows that servanthood and leadership are not opposites. He did not stop leading when he served; rather, his service gave moral weight to his leadership. After washing the disciples' feet, he affirmed that he was their Lord and Master and then instructed them to follow his example (John 13:12–15). Authority and humility therefore worked together. Leadership was not rejected; it was redeemed through service.

This unity is important for organizations, ministries, schools, and communities. A leader who accepts responsibility without humility may become controlling, while a person who values humility without responsibility may become passive. Leader servanthood helps hold the two together. It calls the leader to accept responsibility while continually submitting motives, methods, and power to the discipline of service. In practice, this posture produces approachability, patience, integrity, and willingness to perform tasks that advance the good of others even when those tasks do not increase the leader's public status.

INSIGHTS FROM CHRISTIAN AUTHORITY AND LOVE

Watchman Nee's reflections on spiritual authority provide useful support for this argument. Nee (1972) argued that legitimate spiritual authority is inseparable from submission to God. Authority, in this view, is not personal possession to be used for ego or control; it is delegated responsibility exercised under God's character. This perspective strengthens the idea of leader servanthood because it places the leader first under divine authority before placing the leader over people in any administrative or ministerial sense.

Nee's emphasis also guards against the danger identified by Harding (2022), namely the possibility that servant leadership language may conceal arrogance. If authority is treated as stewardship under God, the leader is less likely to confuse position with superiority. Such a leader remains accountable for the effect of decisions on followers, colleagues, and the wider community.

Love is equally important. Hagin (1994) emphasized that Christian conduct must be motivated by the love of God. In servant leadership terms, love protects service from becoming performance, manipulation, or mere image management. Patterson (2003) also identified love and humility among the core virtues of the servant leader. However, they should be based on a recognition of higher Divine authority.

REFLECTIVE APPLICATION FROM THE ASLEAD LEADERSHIP JOURNEY

The ASLEAD servant leadership experience provided a practical setting for testing these ideas. The most important lesson was that it is easier to describe servanthood than to practice it consistently. Reflecting on Jesus washing the disciples' feet challenged the author to examine areas where leadership duties had quietly become associated with status rather than service.

One practical example involved willingness to participate personally in ordinary support tasks that would normally be delegated. Rather than treating such tasks as beneath leadership time, the author began to view them as opportunities to model the values being taught. Participating directly in a cleanup effort with junior colleagues became a simple but memorable exercise in humility. It demonstrated that no honest act done in love is beneath a leader who desires to serve.

The result was not a loss of authority but a strengthening of trust. Colleagues noticed that service was not being demanded from a distance but modeled in practice. Such moments helped discern the leader's heart attitude of service. Repeated acts of humble participation made service more natural and reduced the tendency to protect status.

The reflective journey also showed that lapses into ego, impatience, or status-conscious decision-making produced tension, while leader decisions approached as service and stewardship produced peace, cooperation, and stronger relationships. The leader remains firm where responsibility requires firmness, but firmness is moderated by humility, listening, and love.

CONCLUSION

This article clarified leader servanthship as a reinforcing complement to servant leadership. It argued that leader servanthship should not be understood as a leader-first distortion, a demand that others serve the leader, or a competing leadership theory. Instead, it is a conceptual lens for naming the inward servant posture that makes leader servanthship authentic, consistent, and spiritually grounded.

The biblical model of Jesus Christ showed that leadership and servanthood can exist in perfect unity. Our Lord Jesus Christ, as the supreme leader, exercised authority through humility, obedience, love, and sacrificial service. His example demonstrates that the way to credible Christian leadership is not the pursuit of status but the faithful acceptance of responsibility under God and for the good of others.

The implications for this leader servanthship practice are significant. Organizations and communities need leaders who can exercise authority without arrogance, make decisions without selfish ambition, and serve without seeking applause. Leader servanthship contributes to this need by emphasizing the being behind the doing. It calls leaders to cultivate the character from which servant leadership behaviors can flow with integrity.

In contexts marked by mistrust, competition, and abuse of authority, leader servanthship offers a healing alternative. It encourages leaders to wash feet rather than wash their hands of responsibility. It invites leaders to serve while leading and to lead while remaining servants before God. Such leadership is not merely effective; it is faithful to the example of Christ and capable of transforming people, institutions, and communities.

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