

Is Servant Leadership a ‘Christian Theory’? A Critical Examination of Greenleaf’s Servant Leadership Concept

Stephen Gichuhi Kimotho

Department of Communication, United States International University, Nairobi, Kenya.

**Corresponding Author: Stephen Gichuhi Kimotho, Department of Communication, United States International University, Nairobi, Kenya. sgkimotho@usiui.ac.ke*

ABSTRACT

Since Robert Greenleaf put down his seminal leadership ideas dubbed *The Servant as Leader*, in 1970, there has been a tremendous growth in interest in his ideas and philosophy of servant leadership. Varied reasons have been attributed to this growth of interest. Though this paper will not review the reasons for the growth in interest in Greenleaf ideas, by various scholars, this paper will try to establish whether there are any justifications for labeling Servant Leadership “Christian theory.” To do this, this paper looks into the background of the proponent of the theory of servant leadership- Greenleaf and assesses the definition of the concept of servant leadership. Then the paper raises four key arguments that lead to the current argument of whether or not there are any justifications for labeling servant Leadership “Christian theory”? Finally, the paper critically dissects into the philosophical grounding of the concept of servant leadership and illustrates its spiritual vacuity and dogmatic distortion. This study found that there were significant conceptual differences between Greenleaf’s and the biblical perspective of servant leadership. In general, this study concludes that, Greenleaf concept of servant leadership is deficient in its foundation and cannot be labelled as a Christian theory of leadership.

Keywords: Greenfield, servant, leadership, Christian, theory

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper was to review concept of servant leadership and examine whether there were justifiable grounds for referring to Greenleaf’s concept of Servant Leadership, as a “Christian Theory”- despite the fact that Greenfield acknowledges that the word servant occurs 1,300 times in the bible.

In order to understand if there are any justifiable grounds to call Greenleaf’s ‘Servant Leadership’ concept a Christian theory, it is important to understand what Robert Greenleaf meant by ‘Servant Leadership.’ Greenleaf use of the term “servant leader” was deduction of his personal reflections, experiences and observations concerning the state of leadership then, in organizations, and the reading of a metaphorical story written by Hermann Hesse (Boyum, 2006). Hesse’s story *A Journey to the East* narrates an experience of a group of pilgrims who set off to discover the ultimate ‘Eastern order.’ Though the pilgrims went through many tribulations and visitations, Leo a loyal servant kept them moving. When Leo finally left the journey, there arose various self-proclaimed leaders from among the pilgrims.

The narrator observes that although the mission to discover the order failed, one pilgrim reunited with the faithful servant Leo, and discovered that Leo was the actual leader of the ‘Eastern order’ that they sought. Greenleaf concluded that the nature of true leaders is their willingness to be first and primarily, to be a servant to others. It is this very desire to serve others, which makes one great (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 13).

As Greenleaf notes, “Servant-Leadership is a practical philosophy which supports people who choose to serve first, and then lead as a way of expanding service to individuals and institutions.” Spears, (2004) observe that servant-leaders may or may not hold formal leadership positions. Servant-leadership encourages collaboration, trust, foresight, listening, and the ethical use of power and empowerment. In addition, Greenleaf suggests such traits as, listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, stewardship and building community as important to servant leadership (Pierce, 2011)

To a large extent the notion of servant leadership runs counter-culture as far as traditional leadership is concerned (Greenleaf,

1977). Greenleaf's wish in conceptualizing the idea of servant leadership was that leaders would serve with skill, understanding, and spirit. In Greenleaf's view, greatness in leadership arose out of being a servant first. Greenleaf considered servant leadership as less coercive and more collaborative- than the dominating notions of conventional leadership. As Ngunjiri (2006) observes, a servant leader does not withdraw from engagement with the system but rather critically engages the system in search of social justice; *“that is, servant leaders do not merely criticize issues like corruption, injustice, and other structural evils; rather, a servant leader ponders what she can do about it and engages in action and advocacy”* (Ngunjiri, 2006). As Greenleaf observed, “criticism has its place, but as a total preoccupation, it is sterile” (p. 11). For Greenleaf, “the servant leader is servant first...*It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead”* (p. 13). Several scholars have established that servant leaders exhibited servant leader characteristics, such as deep spirituality, keen sense of vision and direction, strong sense of efficacy, dedication to community building, collaborative leadership styles, and commitment to their mission or calling (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Jones, 2003; Mabokela, 2003a; Murtadha-Watts, 1999).

Core concepts of servant leadership include an innate value and desire to serve, and willingness to act on the desire to serve by the leader, and trust from those led. Foresight of the leader is derived from their ethics and is a foundational component, as well as the ability to act constructively on that knowledge, when given a chance to act (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 26). In summary Greenleaf's initial premise was as follows: (1) the leader is a servant first. It begins with the natural feeling of wanting to serve first, (2) the servant first makes sure that the highest priority needs of others are being met, (3) success is when those who are served become healthier, freer, more autonomous, and wiser and as a result become servants themselves and that (4) a servant can only become a leader if a leader remains a servant. (Greenleaf 1977, p.13)

There are some historical events which lend insight to Greenleaf's conceptual development of servant leadership that are worth mention in this paper. For instance, by the 1960's United States College campuses were undergoing an extreme amount of turmoil as a result of the

United States' involvement in the Vietnam War. Students and adults alike began to question cultural values, morals, and authority. It was during this time Greenleaf began to question the current state of leadership in educational institutions and business organizations. Greenleaf recognized in the 1960's the cultural crossfire in which war, capitalism, industrial education, political agendas, socio-economic class spread, religious debate and secular separation of religion and society, the mobility of people, and globalization, caused America to move from social efficiency to self-efficiency. Humanism he believed was the cause of the leadership crisis (Greenleaf, 1977). However, the philosophical system in which he aligned his spiritual and cognitive thoughts requires further discussion.

POSSIBLE JUSTIFICATIONS FOR SERVANT LEADERSHIP AS ‘CHRISTIAN THEORY’

Scriptural Foundations of Servant Leadership

Oxford English Dictionary describes the term servant as “one who is under obligation to work for the benefit of a superior and to obey his or her commands” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2008). As Sendjaya and Sarros, (2002) observe, the original term servant leader is accredited to Christianity and the ancient teachings of Jesus. Instruction given by Jesus on the qualities of a leader, the role of the leader and the issue of power or (authority) are captured in various texts in the bible.

The Bible specifically identifies Jesus as a servant or expounding on the concept of servant hood in several places: Matthew 12:18, Acts 3:13, 4:27, 4:30, Romans 15:8, Philippians 2:7, and Matthew 20:25-28. In Matthew 20:25-28 for instance, Jesus says the following on being a servant *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”*

One major statement of Jesus in the verse quoted above is His specification of the prerequisite for greatness in the kingdom of God – *“whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be*

first must be your slave” (Matthew 20:26-27; Mark 10:43). The Greek word for Servant is *diakonos*. It refers to the “servant of someone” (Bauer et al., 1979, p. 184) or “the servant of a master” (Beyer, 1964, p. 88). *Diakonos* is the root word for deacon, a position of servant hood in the body of Christ (I Timothy 3:8-13). The Greek word for slave is *doulos*. It refers to a “slave – to the master” (Bauer et al., p. 205). As Rengstorf puts it, we hence have a service which is not a matter of choice for the one who renders it, - he has to perform whether he likes it or not, because he is subject as a slave to an alien will, to the will of his owner . . . in *doulos* the stress is . . . on the slave’s dependence on his lord” (Rengstorf, 1964, p. 261). Given the underlying meaning of the critical words, the text indicates that greatness in the kingdom of God does not come through power or authority but rather through service. According to Ladd (1974), these passages speak of love, which “means utterly selfless service – the willingness to fill the most humble and menial tasks of service to one’s fellows” (p. 280).

The other critical area of the quoted passage and important as far as our discussion of servant leadership is concerned, is Jesus’ identification of His own servant nature. He stated, “*The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve*” (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). Cullman argues that from the perspective of Christ, the phrase “Son of Man” replaced the designation Messiah; it is a comprehensive term that “embraces the total work of Jesus” (Cullman, 1959, p. 137). As Bauer et al. observe, in this verse, the Greek verb “served” and the infinitive “to serve” belong to the same word family as the noun *diakonos* (Bauer et al., 1979, p. 184). Consequently, Jesus indicated that although He was the totality of the Messiah, He did not come to be the king served by others but rather to be the servant of humanity. Ladd observes that Jesus’ crucifixion was “the highest manifestation of His entire life of service to God and man” (Ladd, 1974, p. 187).

The biblical perspective of servant leadership is based on an individual being “a servant to both God and others.” Snodgrass (1993, p. 13) supports this perspective, noting that Christians understand their role of being servants on account of the role model of Christ and “servant hood cannot be conjured up by disciplines or special acts.” Like the Christian conception of servant hood, Greenleaf (1997) keeps on underscoring the need for an emphasis on

“prioritizing being servants first, and then leading” (p. 13). From this point of view Greenleaf concept of servant leadership really marries well with Christ description of servant hood.

In conclusion, it is also important to highlight that believers also are called servants at many points through the scriptures (i.e., Matt 10:24, 20:27, 25:21; John 15:15; Rom 1:1, 16:1; 1 Cor 9:19; Gal 1:10; Col 4:12; 2 Tim 2:24; Heb 3:5; 2 Pet 1:1; Jude 1—to cite only a few). While I acknowledge that the space to develop the various meanings of servant hood in the New Testament or even the diverse biblical terms that translate to “servant”, is limited- it is important though to note that servant hood is part and parcel of the biblical composites known to many in and out of leadership platforms and there is no denying this fact.

Servant Leadership and Spirituality

Another area that may justify Greenleaf’s servant leadership concept as a tenable Christian theory is the connection between servant leadership and spirituality. Greenleaf (1977), Spears (1995a; 2002) and Williams (1998) define servant leadership as those called to lead by serving. These researchers further emphasized that the spirit of servant leadership is a spirit of moral authority and moral conviction. In addition to servant leadership being a moral imperative, servant leadership thrives on the concept of reciprocity. In this regard, Greenleaf, Spears, and Williams demonstrate the interconnections of their moral code and a willingness to serve through their leadership roles.

Servant leadership is based on teamwork and community, it seeks to involve others in making decisions, it is strongly based in an ethical imperative and caring behavior, and it attempts to enhance personal growth of those being served as well as the overall quality of the institution in which the leaders serve (Greenleaf, 1977). As Spears (2002) puts it servant leaders are those who are “deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual...to nurture the personal, professional, and spiritual growth.” The interconnectedness of spirituality and servant leadership is about getting people to a higher level of self-fulfillment or self-actualization by leading people at a higher level. These ideas resonate very well with Christ’s emphasis on selflessness and caring behavior as illustrated in the story of a Good Samaritan in

the Holy Bible. From this point of view servant leadership's picture of Jesus is consistent with the exemplary model of Christ's life and moral and spiritual expectations.

Servant Leadership and the Concept of Love

The concept of love forms foundation of another reason that could be used to justify servant leadership as a Christian theory. Stone, Russell and Patterson (2003) along with Winston (2002) point out that servant leaders have a high regard for their followers. Winston (2002) calls this high regard, ‘Agapao love’, the foundational construct of servant leadership. According to Winston (2003), as the foundational construct of servant leadership, Agapao love is a thermometer that plays an important role in determining the success of the servant leader in relation to his followers. As a servant leader practices humility, altruism, vision and trust, the followers will necessarily experience increased hope and will be empowered to become highly effective followers who are set for success and future leadership service. Dedicated and effective servant leaders also inspire these virtues in their followers, and the response of their followers to the leader's behavior is characterized by Agapao love, commitment, and hope that will result in increased intrinsic motivation, altruism towards the leader and the leader's interests, and high levels of service, as a direct consequence.

Servant Leadership and the Philosophical System

Philosophical concepts are not derived in a vacuum (Senge, 1990). Revealing a philosophy is a twofold task, namely to expose the philosopher's system and to explain how the historical context contributes to this system (Catana, 2005, p. 78). A philosophical framework as proposed by Ruona and Lynham, (2004) was utilized to make explicit the nature of being, values, beliefs and assumptions that inform the act of servant leadership. I argue with Boyum (2006) that knowledge is socially constructed as well as socially applied and therefore, we can trace the historical issues which influenced Greenleaf. Boyum suggest three historical themes that offer insight into the Greenleaf's observations and resultant essays – the movement in industry from collectivism toward empirical and pragmatic efficiency; the parallel the debate at that time on the purpose of vocational education; and the social movement of humanism, individualism and moral

fragmentation (Greenleaf, 1977; Lazerson & Grubb, 1974). What is or is not servant leadership? Since philosophy is a system in which the ontology, epistemology and axiology informs and impacts ones view of the world (Ruona & Lynham, 2004, p. 152) the answer to this question arguably is to make explicit the philosophical system of servant leadership (Boyum, 2006).

Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) offered the most notable contribution to any discussion on a philosophical framework for servant leadership. They contend Judeo Christian and biblical teaching are foundational to Greenleaf's ontology and thus inform and direct the act of servant leadership. As Boyum (2006) observes, the original work of Greenleaf and how he viewed the world was grounded in what he described as an eastern paradigm (Greenleaf, 1996). Gioa & Pitre, (1990) describe the term paradigm as the collective related concepts of phenomena. His thoughts were formulated out of his spiritual beliefs, how he lived and his values. As a self-proclaimed Quaker, his was influenced by community and commitment, the latter being a commitment to grow in spiritual faith. Notably, the Quaker faith is grounded in Judeo Christian philosophy and biblical scripture, and advocates for the integration of spiritual faith in all aspects on one's life (Boyum, 2006).

The Biblical precedent for servant leadership is undeniable. In fact, Warren (2002) contends that there is specific biblical scripture and Judeo Christian teaching associated with servant leadership and that serving others is one of the five main tenets within the Biblical worldview. Consequently, Warren argues that humans are created to serve, to make ourselves available to serve, to pay attention to the needs of others, to do the best with the resources available to us, to do everything with equal dedication, to be faithful and humble (p. 257-264).

In conclusion, as Boyum (2006) observes, the Biblical worldview promotes the concept of *grace*, which is foundational to the altruistic nature, and focus of a servant leader. The integration of grace from God into ones being, by following the teachings of Christ, allows one to interact with others in the same manner. Others then do not need to do or act they receive love and serve simply because of whom they are as fellow human beings (Schaeffer, 1978; Warren, 2002).

WHY SERVANT LEADERSHIP CANNOT BE JUSTIFIED AS ‘CHRISTIAN THEORY’

While I have raised four compelling reasons why servant leadership concept qualifies as a Christian theory, I will use this section to argue that there exist equally compelling and important reasons why servant leadership concept cannot be justified as ‘Christian theory.’

Servant leadership theory is such alluring theory that many Christians can hardly reject. There are several reasons for this scenario but the most compelling one is the fact that servant leadership theory strikes many Christians as a theory built on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The scripture ultimately recognizes Jesus Christ as the perfect example of servant hood, that is - by leaving all the glory of heaven to come as a human and accepting the way of the cross. It is on his earthly ministry that the church was built that spread his life giving message to the ends of the earth after his ascension into heaven. Here we are talking about a Church of the man who cloaked a towel about Himself to wash His own disciple’s feet as His final lesson to them. For sure, from such experiences many Christians cannot reject servant leadership as the sound approach to leading others.

In fact, from the leadership point of view, there is need to add that the concept of servant leadership has deep implications for church leaders. Some of these implications as noted by Drury (2003) include:

- Church leaders must value people, for they are God’s handiwork. Listening to people is important in the church. This is how the Holy Spirit guides the church—through its people, not just through the designated leader.
- Church leaders must be people-developers more than program-pushers. The church based servant leader starts with the people, not the program. People development is the church’s product.
- The church does not make a product, it is the product. Churches don’t just have pizza parties to attract new people—they do this to build community, to become what the church is to be: a community of the saints. Community building is a primary task of the church leader.
- Church leaders must be authentic people who inspire trust. Talking about big dreams for

the people to follow isn’t enough; people follow leaders, not dreams. And they follow leaders with trustworthy integrity.

- Leaders in the church must be men and women of vision, seeing the future and clarifying goals. In the church vision isn’t just a picture of a bigger church or larger congregation. It is a picture of God’s kingdom as it should be and seeing one local church’s part in that vision.
- Church leaders should help their followers see God’s vision directly from God, not just from the pastor. The followers can be trusted with decision-making power on how that church can become what God desires. After all, the clergy do not get filled with a different Holy Spirit than the laity.

However, I argue that even these implications for leadership cited by Drury, suffice it not, to justify the servant leadership a ‘Christian theory’. As Ogletree, (2008) observes that virtues like: hope, faith, civility, trust, piety, relate to leadership in general and are not necessarily unique to any specific faith or religion not even Christianity. Therefore, the functional attributes including having vision, being honest, trustworthy, service oriented, a role model, demonstrating appreciation of others’ service, and empowerment, are not unique to Christianity and are not the transformative pivot to Christianity. It is an individual’s personal relationship with Christ that transforms and the character and purposes of Christ must become pre-eminent in an individual’s life.

Otherwise, Operationalizing, adopting and putting into strict practice the virtues that are associated with servant leadership, do not in my opinion make an individual become a Christian. However, by doing this, an individual may succeed in helping these people feel that they are better human being, living a more right or even holier life. It is this inherent fact of servant leadership, in my opinion that marks one of the weak lines of Servant Leadership as a Christian theory. This is because it courts the doctrine of kenosis. By Servant leadership being associated closely with the doctrine of kenosis, it leads to attempts to imitate what is perceived to be the humble Jesus, with many attendant distortions for both Christology and humanity (Niewold, 2007).

But why is it that many scholars and

personalities in leadership readily endorse servant leadership as a Christian theory? Niewold (2007) observes that for a long time there has been little critical attention given to alternative Christologies within the field of leadership. I argue here that Servant leadership reinforces what many Christians as well as non-Christians would wish to believe about the son of God rather than what might otherwise be believed. As Niewold, (2007) observes, much of servant leadership theory seems to be based on circular reasoning: since Christian leadership according to the common argument must of necessity be servant-like, and since Christian leadership is based on what Christ was like, Christ must have been above all else a servant (Niewold, 2007).

Greenleaf was aware that attributes like faith, trust, love etc. are not unique to Christian faith. Greenleaf's (1977, 1978) was not writing as a Christian business person or as a representative of a Christian body or a theologian for that matter. However, he was pretty aware of the importance of the attribute discussed in this paper that could be used as justifications for his theory as a Christian theory, though he did not brand it as such. Indeed, he argues that the servant leader brings together service and meaning—the leader is attuned to basic spiritual values (not necessarily Christian- (emphasis mine) and, in serving them serves others including colleagues, the organization, and society. This inward-directedness that promises satisfaction and almost redemption for the leader and those he leads through improving the mental and spiritual capacity brings me to my second reason why I argue that Servant leadership may not be justified as a Christian theory. Niewold (2007) describes this inward-directedness as that aspect of servant leadership stressing the interior mental and spiritual processes of the leader as the means whereby outward change is affected. This aspect of servant leadership can hardly be divorced from Pelagianism. Pelagianism refers to a theological doctrine put forward by Pelagius which denied original sin and affirmed the ability of humans to be righteous through their own acts. Supporting this point Niewold argues that the servant posture often presents itself as the means whereby both the leader and the follower find their human fulfilment, apart from the transforming power of Jesus Christ. Servant leadership seems to say that it is the process of choosing servant hood over alternative pursuits

that affects the life-changing experience of individuals and organizations. I contend with Niewold that in true existentialist fashion, this choosing renders the leader's existence authentic, and such existence, whatever it may mean, is alone efficacious for organizational well-being. Niewold argues that when leaders and those he leads get to such a point - the personal construction of reality that characterizes many Pelagian movements set in.

Having said that, then I aver that Servant leadership as generally understood is, then, heritor to these Christological distortions that have arisen in postmodern world and unfortunately have been preserves and upheld by postmodern church. When the theme of servant leadership is picked blindly by the church leaders and given a blanket application in the ministry it may at some point eclipse the older and primary calling of Christians as disciples and witnesses. The abstract spirituality of servant leadership only renders to the reduction of the gospel of Christ to ethical considerations.

CONCLUSION

I conclude that the person who aspires to seek genuine servant leadership, seeks to follow the footsteps of Christ. Striking an individual and personal relationship with Christ and letting the character and purposes of Christ become pre-eminent in one's life should form the fundamental foundation of concept servant hood that would be tenable as a Christian theory. The inability of Greenleaf theory to establish this fundamental link, in my opinion leaves the concept hollow though paradoxically stuffed with abstract spirituality. I therefore, find Greenleaf concept of servant leadership fatuous and deficient as a Christian theory of leadership.

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