

A LOOK AT GREENLEAF'S SERVANT LEADERSHIP FROM A BIBLICAL SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE

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THE PURPOSE of this paper is to critically assess three of the underlying assumptions of Servant Leadership as purported by Greenleaf, the "father" who coined the phrase in 1970.¹ These three assumptions are: (1) "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";² (2) "Faith is the choice of the nobler hypothesis. Not the noblest; one never know what that is. But the nobler, the best one can see when the choice is made";³ and (3) "Everything begins with the initiative of an individual."⁴

At a cursory glance, the term "servant leadership" ignited a sense of pride in me as a Christian. My thoughts, and feelings, all nominated by the fact that I had read many times, and heard it preached in many sermons, that Jesus, was a servant leader. Biblical accounts of His way of dealing with people, for example serving them, instead of having them serving Him, sort of reaffirmed my thoughts that indeed the term "servant leadership" was a great

¹R. K; Greenleaf, *The power of servant leadership*, ed. L. C. Spears (San Francisco; USA: Berrett-Koehler 1998).

²R. K. Greenleaf, *25th anniversary ed. Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness. The Servant as leader* (2002), 21. Retrieved from <http://books.google.com/books?id=gOexpCA5JqIC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>; R. K. Greenleaf, *The power of servant leadership*, ed. L. C. Spears (San Francisco; USA Berrett-Koehler, 1998), 4.

³Ibid., 23

⁴Ibid., 28.

thing. After all, I had simply based it on one fact, that Jesus was a servant leader, and felt that some justice was finally being done to the work He had done while on earth. I thought that finally, people were actually willing to pattern their leadership after that of His. And note, I said at a cursory glance.

It is generally said that we should not throw the baby along with the bath water. Surely this article will in no wise throw away servant leadership. I am not seeking to deny the credence, practicality or "goodness" of servant leadership, nor am I saying that servant leadership in any way inherently or covertly evil. My focus is to merely attempt to critically analyze what I consider to be three of its' basic assumptions as I read the very first chapter of the book 'The Servant as leader' in his 25th edition of 'Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness'. Notably, the ten characteristics of a servant leader R. F. Russell, and A. G. Stone put forward by Greenleaf all seem to exemplify characteristics found in the life of Jesus while he was on earth. I therefore believe that we need to explore these assumptions of Greenleaf's servant leadership a little more closely because it seems to fundamentally conflict Spiritual Leadership in the Bible.

It is my hope that this analysis will provide leaders within Seventh-day Adventist circles a more balanced framework from which to operate when teaching and promoting the use of servant leadership merely from Greenleaf's perspective. As such, I will draw on just the three points I consider as assumptions which seem critical as we consider "his" servant leadership since it does not openly give credit to the Bible or the life of Christ as inspiration for its genesis.

1. The Servant-Leader is Servant First

My first concern with Greenleaf's servant leadership is his statement that "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."¹ Though the idea of serving first seems humble at best, the second aspect of aspiring to lead sort of counterbalances the humility that would be expected with the

¹Greenleaf, *Servant leadership*, 21.

notion of service alone. I am in no way suggesting that one should not attain to higher goals, but the aspiration to lead by being a servant first seems tactical to an end. Keathley advocates that in situations like these "there is much more concern for self-fulfillment than for pleasing God and truly serving Him and others as seen in the life of Jesus." My point is that the mere drive by anyone to lead in the first place whether solely as a leader or as a servant first with the aspiration to lead later is dangerous. Blackaby puts it this way,

Secular leadership is something to which people can aspire. It can be achieved through sheer force of will. Spiritual leadership, on the other hand, is not a role for which one applies. Rather, it is assigned by God. God determines each person's assignment.¹

Biblical examples of persons in leadership recounts clearly that they were chosen by God. 1 Corinthians 12: 28 states that we each have a specific role to play "Here are some of the parts God has appointed for the church: first are apostles, second are prophets, third are teachers, then those who do miracles, those who have the gift of healing, those who can help others, those who have the gift of leadership, those who speak in unknown languages" (NLT). But, it is He, God, who chooses and decides who He calls, and for what purpose He has called them.

The Bible is very clear about how leadership occurs. John 15:16 states "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit..." As such servants of God do not call themselves. We see God calling leaders such as Moses, Noah, David and Saul. The story of Jonah (in Jonah 3: 1-10), though it may not be classified and honestly so, as servant leadership, highlights a critical point to the calling of God on someone's life. We cannot call ourselves to leadership. We should not be willing to lead more than God wants to use us so that others would be led, because each of us were created divinely for a particular role. Otherwise,

when serving others and their needs, if the underlying motive and goal is some form of self love, like the praise of others for the service rendered, then one's service is in reality hypocritical. This type of service is really aimed at serving selfish ends—

¹Henry Blackaby & Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People on to God's Agenda* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 2001), 46.

usually in the futile pursuit of personal significance through something like praise, power, or status.¹

2. Question of Faith

My second contention with Greenleaf's servant leadership is the issue of faith. In discussing a "theory of prophecy" Greenleaf mentions what Dean Inge says, that

Faith is the choice of the nobler hypothesis. Not the noblest; one never know what that is. But the nobler, the best one can see when the choice is made. Since the test of results of one's actions is usually long delayed, the faith that sustains the choice of the nobler hypothesis is psychological insight. This is the most dependable part of a true servant.²

This assumption or viewpoint seems somewhat contradictory with Biblical reason since the Bible defines faith as "the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see" (Hebrews 11: 1, NLT). Faith of the Bible is not merely a matter of choice but rather a matter of obedience. Faith of the Bible is not measured by how long God will take to respond or come through, as in Greenleaf's 'long delay' but rather, obeying in spite of what the results might be, and not measuring units of time.

Conversely, the faith mentioned in Greenleaf (2002) is something of a gracious or good choice of some theory, premise, assumption or practice. However, Hebrews 11: 6 clearly states that "without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." The Biblical view of faith is not based on "the best one can see when the choice is made", but rather, it is based on confidence in the sightless; based on evidence of things unseen. As such, we can assume that the faith of the Bible is rooted in a belief of the God who knows and sees all things.

The very best example of such a faith in my opinion is that of the faith displayed by Abraham recorded in Genesis 22: 1-19. There we see God asking Abraham to sacrifice his only son, and

¹J. H. Keathley, *Mark #8: The heart of a servant*. Retrieved from <http://bible.org/seriespage/mark-8-heart-servant>The Holy Bible. Kings James Version

²Greenleaf, 25th anniversary ed. *Servant leadership*, 23.

Abraham responding in obedience. Notably, the statement of faith was actually made in a conversation between Abraham and his son Isaac. Even though Abraham had done all that was required of Him by God, when little Isaac asked 'daddy where is the lamb since we have the fire and the wood'? Abraham responded "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (verse 8). This does not suggest that Abraham knew what God would have done. Nonetheless, in the absence of the God's knowledge, Abraham was ready to go all the way. Verse 13 then shows how God rewarded Abraham's faith by providing "a lamb caught in the thicket." As such, Abraham's faith was not based on "psychological insight" but on absolute trust that God knew what was best.

3. The Individual as Originator

My final contention and by no means the last of my concerns regarding Greenleaf's servant leadership is the statement that "everything begins with the initiative of an individual" (p. 28). This statement seem to refute principles of Biblical teaching, since nothing good can originate from us sinful beings, outside of Christ. In addition, it appears to interfere with a few of the intertwining SDA fundamental beliefs because we believe that through self-revelation, God gives man an understanding of who He is. Seventh-day Adventist and most protestant churches believe that God reveals Himself through general and special revelation. We believe that He does so through nature, history and the human conscience, "God reveals His existence, power, wisdom, majesty, righteousness and glory to all people everywhere, anytime."¹

The Bible declares that "prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21, NJV). In addition, it clearly indicates that "the secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29: 29, KJV). From these Biblical verses I argue that nothing is initiated from mankind. Rather according to scripture "... it is God who is producing in you both the desire and the ability to do what pleases him" (Philipians 2: 13. ISV). As such, whatever man initiates is

¹K. R. Samples, *Without a Doubt: Answering the 20 toughest faith questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 43.

revealed to Him either by God or by the devil; but no plans are derived from the thinking of man.

4. Conclusion

I summarize the three points with a brief comparison between Greenleaf's servant leadership and servant leadership of the Bible. In the first instance, one chooses to lead firstly as a servant and then leader; in the Bible, the leader is chosen by God. Secondly, one chooses "faith" as a choice of the nobler hypothesis based on 'the best one can see when the choice is made'; whereas in Biblical faith, one chooses based on the unseen and unknown to the outcome. In the final instance, the individual initiates; but in Biblical terms, God is the one who reveals all plans to men.

Greenleaf's Servant leadership at a deeper glance reveals the core of man's deepest issue which is self. Though on the surface it appears to be for the service of others, this investigation reveals that self is principally inherently enmeshed in servant leadership from Greenleaf's perspective. These assumptions are made because firstly, the leader chooses leadership in his own will and strength; secondly, the leader chooses the path of faith that is based on the best that they can see, and thirdly because the individual is an initiator. In all instances a great degree of self is exhibited. You choose to serve then lead, you choose faith, and you are the originator of your own thoughts.

Contrarily, servant leadership of the Bible is not interested in recognition as leader nor does it seek to gain leadership mobility after first being servant. Servant leadership of the Bible seeks a faith that is wholly reliant on the God who sees and knows all things. It exhibits a type of obedience that does not need to know the end result but act because the end result is determined already by the God who knows the end from the beginning. Faith of the Bible seems to be the only option and not a matter of choice. Finally, servant leadership does not seek glory in initiations and innovations. Rather, it seeks to listen to hear the still small voice of God whether in dream, vision, nature, the Bible, or any other form, than to take the glory of its own. To Greenleaf's servant leadership I say, God is the one who chooses; God is the one who initiates and ends the faith process in man; and God is the one who inspires.