

# WHY SERVANT LEADERSHIP? ITS UNIQUENESS AND PRINCIPLES IN THE LIFE OF JESUS

YOUNG SOO CHUNG, PH.D.

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Philippines

Servant leadership is one of the major topics in Christian leadership education and training programs. Servant leadership is not a matter of knowledge and cognition, or of skills, traits, and theories, but of practice and action. The life of Jesus epitomizes the true and perfect example of servant leadership. In the Christian community, all effective leaders must strive to emulate the attitude of Jesus, whose great love motivated Him to unselfishly give up everything to serve human beings. This article holds to the premise that if the principles of servant leadership demonstrated in the life of Jesus are practiced in the life of human leaders, the church will be positively changed and effectively achieves its mission of saving souls.

*Key Words: Attitude, Humility, Leadership, Love, Obedience, Relationship, Servant Leadership*

## 1. Overview

What is leadership? This is an enigmatic question. While leadership is considered a popular topic in many organizations, its role and function in the organization is not fully understood. Strange to say, numerous articles, surveys, and books have been published, but still, the ambiguity of leadership exists and no agreement on its definition has been reached. James McGregor Burns states, "Leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth."<sup>1</sup>

The definition of leadership in church organizations as well as its types is even more difficult and complex. Thus, this study will first give a description of the importance of leadership, and then attempts to provide a definition with special regard to the church. The study will suggest the

<sup>1</sup> James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1978), 2.

best possible form of church leadership drawn from the example of Jesus Christ. Finally, the characteristics of servant leadership are described.

## 2. Importance of Leadership

Leadership is a common theme seriously considered in every organization. This phenomenon is also recognized in the church. Numerous theories, principles, and services regarding leadership have emerged and faded away, but the investigation of true leadership is ongoing. There are libraries full of books and articles on leadership, but true leaders are succinctly scarce. Marshall Loeb reports in the *Fortune* magazine, "What worried them the most was not production or profits or competition, but this: Where have all the leaders gone?"<sup>2</sup> Aubrey Malphurs and William Mancini quoted James Bolt, the founder of the Executive Development Associates: "The dearth of leadership is apparent throughout society. No matter where we turn, we see the severe lack of faith in the leadership of our schools, religious organizations, and governments."<sup>3</sup>

George Barna, with 15 years of diligent investigation, concludes that there is indeed a lack of leadership. He admits, "I have reached several conclusions regarding the future of the Christian Church in America. The central conclusion is that the American church is dying due to a lack of strong leadership. In this time of unprecedented opportunity and plentiful resources, the church is actually losing influence. The primary reason is the lack of leadership. Nothing is more important than leadership." Therefore "unless we can develop effective leadership within the church, we are not doing all we have been called by God to do to effectively and obediently serve Him."<sup>4</sup>

John Maxwell points out the importance of leadership: "The strength of any organization is a direct result of the strength of its leaders. Weak leaders equal weak organizations. Strong leaders equal strong organizations. Everything rises and falls on leadership."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Marshall Loeb, "Where Leaders Come From," *Fortune* 12 (Sept. 1994): 24.

<sup>3</sup> Aubrey Malphurs and William F. Mancini, *Building Leaders: Blueprints for Developing Leadership at Every Level of Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 37.

<sup>4</sup> George Barna, *Leaders on Leadership* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1997), 18.

<sup>5</sup> John C. Maxwell, *Developing the Leaders Around You: How to Help Others Reach Their Full Potential* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 6.

## 2.1 Definitions and Its Basic Concept

Leadership, generally speaking, suggests movement and progress and can be described by words such as change, influence, movement, growth, or journey. This paper introduces two definitions of leadership. First, Peter Northhouse defines leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.”<sup>6</sup> The determination of leadership as a process is to achieve the goal of the organization. Northhouse envisions the symbiotic relationship between the leader and his followers or subordinates. Consequently it is the interactive event that occurs in the group through mutual reactions to one another.

Second, from the Christian viewpoint, Malphurs and Mancini define a leader as “a servant who uses his or her credibility and capabilities to influence people in a particular context to pursue their God-given direction.”<sup>7</sup> This definition emphasizes the driving force of the leader that has a tremendous impact on the people who are under his influence. In other words, the accomplishment of the goal of the organization largely depends on the ability of the leader.

In addition to these basic definitions, there are some concepts to consider about true leadership in the Christian society. Skip Bell provides a list of three common misunderstandings on leadership: first, leadership is not position. Bell advocates that it is a mistake to talk of leadership in terms of a certain office. Second, leadership is not administration. He intimates that administration is the handling of, caring for, and arranging and organizing present affairs. Third, leadership is not statesmanship. An ambassador represents his nation in official or ceremonial functions. He does not influence the policy or practice of the government. He represents what the nation’s leaders have determined as policy, but he never leads.<sup>8</sup>

## 3. Why Servant Leadership?

Most leadership theories and types focus on the nature or level of maturity of human beings (employees) who are under a leader’s control and the situations they are placed in. For example, Douglas McGregor felt that most human beings dislike work and avoid it whenever possible. He

<sup>6</sup> Peter G. Northhouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.; Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Malphurs and Mancini, *Building Leaders*, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Skip Bell, *A Time to Serve: Church Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Lincoln, NE: Advent Source, 2003), 3-7.

calls it Theory X. Its assumptions commit managers to a pessimistic view of human nature, so the managers tend to be autocratic, control-oriented, and distrustful. McGregor identified a second perspective, Theory Y, which reverses these assumptions by holding that human beings are generally responsible, want to do meaningful work, and are capable of self-direction; hence, managers have optimistic views and their approaches are based on conciliatory behavior.<sup>9</sup>

Another example is Hersey Blanchard's Situational Approach theory. The premise of this theory is that different situations demand different kinds of leadership. That is, leaders should change their leadership style or adopt different leadership styles to direct or support the needs of followers.<sup>10</sup>

These leadership theories identify what kind of leadership style the leaders in any organization may use. That is, the leaders' style and type of leadership are related to the situations they are facing and the employees they work with. Leaders pursue the most effective and efficient method to lead and control the people in order to accomplish the goal or objective of the organization. The basic concept of these general leadership theories is, 'I have to rule over the people (including situations) and control them.'

However, servant leadership is completely different from this concept. Rather than focusing on a situation or the people as the object of control and manipulation a servant-leader pays attention to his own mindset toward others. In other words, a servant-leader focuses not on the nature of the people who are under his control, but on his (the leader's) attitude in serving others. A servant-leader puts himself in the place of a servant and puts the people in the seat of the master and thinks about how to serve them.

Leadership in the church must be different from the world, because the church is not a company or a business organization that is established for gaining profit. The concept of servant leadership prevailed in the Bible throughout the history of God's people. Great characters in the Old Testament such as Abraham, Moses, Daniel, David refer to themselves as servants. In the New Testament, Peter, James, and Paul called themselves "a servant of God," and "a servant of Jesus Christ" (James 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; Titus 1:1).

Why servant leadership? Because the core value of it is love—love to human beings! It was shown in the life of Jesus when He lived in this world. Because of love, God sent His only begotten son, Jesus, into this

<sup>9</sup> Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 1960), 33-34.

<sup>10</sup> Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 91-92.

sinful world (John 3:16). This love is the starting point of history in the salvation of sinners. Because of His love toward His people, He came to this earth and practiced sacrificial love in the form of a servant. Servant leadership is the embodiment of God's love (John 15:12), of biblical teaching (Matt 20:28), and the attitude of the believer (Rom 15:25).

There are advantages in servant leadership. Stephen Prosser who got the inspirational evidence on servant leadership from other authors such as Peter Senge, Warren Bennis, Ken Blanchard, and Stephen Covey speaks of the merits of servant leadership: (1) the principles of servant leadership work and directly influence even in the business area; (2) the moral principle of servant leadership is an imperative part of leadership practices; and (3) servant leadership can transform organizations successfully, and people are able to recognize the changes and accept the leadership.<sup>11</sup>

Here is a similar question, "Why servant leadership is needed? Is it essential to our task?"<sup>12</sup> Denis Tarr and James Kouzes provided the following answers to these questions: First, it works; the recommendations made by Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman related well to its concept: "Excellent companies really are close to their customers—attempting to satisfy their needs and anticipate their wants."<sup>13</sup> Second, it reinforces the nature of one's profession and calls upon its more noble instincts; we often forget that our primary function is in the role of a servant, to bring people together, to collaborate, to cosponsor, to break down walls—real and imagined—to assist in the learning process. Third, it is action-oriented; servant-leaders will never run out of things to do. They have to do with being in the right place at the right time. Actions have to do with the larger agenda of the organization, the community, the region, and the nation. They have to do with the whole learning system in our society.<sup>14</sup> And finally, commitment to the celebration of people and their potential; people who believed foremost in the concept of service, who were servant-leaders, were successful leaders. It is their belief in serving others that enables these executives to provide leadership and makes others follow willingly.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Prosser, *To Be a Servant-Leader* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), 64-70.

<sup>12</sup> Larry C. Spears, ed., *Reflections on Leadership: How Robert K. Greenleaf's Theory of Servant-Leadership Influenced Today's Top Management Thinkers* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1995), ix.

<sup>13</sup> Dennies Tarr, "The Strategic Toughness of Servant-Leadership," in *Reflections on Leadership*, 82-83.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose it, Why People Demand It* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 185.

Henri Nouwen responded on the necessity on why servant leadership is needed in the Christian community by pointing out the crucial factor of servant leadership: "power is constantly abandoned in favor of love, it is true [servant] leadership."<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. Principles of Servant Leadership in the Life of Jesus

Following, I will describe the principles of servant leadership in Jesus' teachings and examples. Larry Spears studied Greenleaf's writings and essays and identified ten characteristics of the servant leader such as awareness, building community, commitment to the growth of people, conceptualization, empathy, foresight, healing, listening, persuasion, and stewardship.<sup>17</sup> Although not universally agreed upon these characteristics will explain the uniqueness of servant leadership.

Jesus opted for an unpopular, non-existent model of leadership during His earthly ministry—servant leadership. In the Bible, the teaching and example of Jesus on leadership were quite different from the trend of His day. In his book, *Spiritual Leadership*, Oswald J. Sanders evaluates the teaching of Jesus on leadership by asserting that "many of His teachings were startling and revolutionary, and none more so than those on leadership."<sup>18</sup> The Gospel writers saw the importance of His teaching on leadership and each of them records His central concept of service (Matt 20:25-28; Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:24-27).

Theodore W. Engstrom summarized this concept: "Jesus teaches all leaders for all time that greatness is not found in rank or position but in service. He makes it clear that true leadership is grounded in love which must issue in service."<sup>19</sup> The following characteristics are the principles of leadership shown in the life of Jesus, the model for servant leadership.

<sup>16</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York, NY: The Crossroad, 1989), 63.

<sup>17</sup> Spears, *Reflections on Leadership*, 4-7. The alphabetical listing of these characteristics is rearranged by the writer.

<sup>18</sup> Oswald J. Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1967), 23-24.

<sup>19</sup> Theodore W. Engstrom, *The Making of a Christian Leader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 37.

## 4.1 Humility

Gene Wilkes provides important insights on humility. In his book, *Jesus on Leadership*, he says, "Servant leaders humble themselves and wait for God to exalt them."<sup>20</sup> Jesus says that "for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11). God humbles and God exalts. Peter, the Apostle, points out this truth, "Humble ourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time" (1 Pet 5:6). In other words, when one exalts oneself, it constitutes a worldly nature. Self-exaltation is nothing but pride, which goes before destruction. Voluntary humility before God—allowing Him to work in a person's life and seeing one's true self before God and God's call on one's life—results in God's exaltation of that person. Charles Manz comments on humility:

Don't seek honor. Rather, let it seek you in its own way and when the time is right. Don't even think about it. Go about your business pursuing constructive work and focus on honoring and recognizing the contributions of others rather than your own. If you do this sincerely, your efforts will often receive the recognition they deserve, and more, as you don't seek and expect it.<sup>21</sup>

Paul writes to the Philippian church about Jesus' humility. Jesus became a servant, and was obedient unto death (Phil 2:5-8). Jesus humbled Himself before the Father and before humankind for the sake of the redemption of humanity. His exaltation was realized when He was resurrected from the dead, ascended back to heaven, and was seated at the right hand of the Father (Acts 5:30-31).

Humility is the greatest characteristic of Jesus' life and the principle that all His followers need to adopt. Robert D. Kennedy writes, "Christ showed that the way up was down. He showed that the 'Hall of Fame' and the 'Who's Who' are not necessary for the kingdom, thus calling every disciple to let Him be the center and the circumference of their lives."<sup>22</sup> Based on this notion, he explains humility as "self is put in the background and Christ and others are in the foreground."<sup>23</sup> The words of

<sup>20</sup> Gene C. Wilkes, *Jesus on Leadership* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1998), 25.

<sup>21</sup> Charles C. Manz, *The Leadership Wisdom of Jesus: Practical Lessons for Today* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 1999), 24.

<sup>22</sup> Robert D. Kennedy, *The Politics of the Basin: A Perspective on the Church as Community* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995), 25.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

Kennedy, noting that leadership of servanthood is not a privilege but responsibility is indeed true.<sup>24</sup>

## 4.2 Obedience to God

Jesus obeyed the will of the Father. "Jesus conceived of His mission as one of obedience to the Father's will."<sup>25</sup> He both led as a servant and obeyed as a servant. As Jesus asked His disciples to obey God's word to receive salvation, He showed His obedience to the will of God: "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of Him who sent me" (John 6:39).

Morris Venden notes that, "He [Jesus] is our greatest single example of genuine obedience."<sup>26</sup> In her famous book, *The Desire of Ages*, Ellen G. White states that Jesus, "as the son of man, . . . gave us an example of obedience."<sup>27</sup> Jesus' example of obedience is the biblical principle for the servant-leader to keep in mind. Wilkes cites Calvin Miller's statement: "Servant-leadership is nurtured in the Spirit by following Jesus. Servant leaders generally are created not in commanding others but in obeying their commander."<sup>28</sup>

David Benner gives a deeper meaning to obedience. He says, "Obedience is closely related to authority. To obey is to submit to the authority of someone. . . . If we obey the law of God, we submit to the authority of God." He continues on this topic and says, "This is the core of the biblical understanding of obedience."<sup>29</sup> To Jesus, obedience is submission to God's authority. Kennedy agreed to this concept of obedience, and explained, "To be obedient is to accept 'submission' to 'the will of God' as Jesus submitted His will to His Father's will."<sup>30</sup> It indicates that true obedience means not only behavioral compliance, but also inner surrender. This is the phrase the Apostle Paul uses in describing the goal of spirituality, namely to have "obedience from the heart" (Rom 6:17 NASB).

<sup>24</sup> Kennedy, *Politics of the Basin*, 44.

<sup>25</sup> Raoul Dederen, "Christ: His Person and Work," in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (ed. Raoul Dederen; Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000), 170.

<sup>26</sup> Morris Venden, *Obedience of Faith* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1983), 89.

<sup>27</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1964), 24.

<sup>28</sup> Wilkes, *Jesus on Leadership*, 80.

<sup>29</sup> David G. Benner, *Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 56-57

<sup>30</sup> Kennedy, *Politics of the Basin*, 31.



### 4.3 Build Teams

Jesus built teams beginning with twelve different disciples and in three and a half years, trained them to take on the world after His earthly mission ended. Jesus trained them with power from on high during His life on earth. David McKenna, in his book *Power to Follow, Grace to Lead*, discusses how Jesus built an “Incarnational Team Model” by leading His twelve companions through the stages of forming, norming, storming, and performing.<sup>31</sup>

Jesus’ Forming Stage considered selecting ordinary people and organizing them into teams. McKenna says, “An Incarnational leader is a person who builds disciples.”<sup>32</sup> Jesus’ Norming Stage was continuous, and He set “high, clear, and consistent” levels of expectations for His followers. The expectations Jesus kept before His disciples were in preaching and teaching, His “redemptive vision,” and the “principle of the kingdom of God.”<sup>33</sup>

Jesus’ Storming Stage understood the inevitability of conflict in the context of change. McKenna specifically pointed out the attitude of Jesus on the topic of conflict:

First, Jesus accepted conflict as another opportunity for developing His disciples. Second, He confronted the conflicting parties immediately. Third, He diagnosed the root of the problem in human nature. Fourth, He moved the conflict to common ground where the protagonists agree. Fifth, He found a common symbol with which the parties could affirmatively identify. Sixth, He used the occasion to refocus His vision and reinforce His mission in the minds of the ‘storming’ disciples. Seventh, and finally, He patiently and positively dealt with conflict even when the problem surfaced repeatedly in different guises.<sup>34</sup>

Douglass Lewis recognized conflict as a “normal, natural, and healthy part of life in the world” and “conflict does not have to be destructive or debilitating. It can provide opportunities for growth and creativity that might not emerge otherwise.”<sup>35</sup> He added, “[c]ertainly Jesus continually created conflict for his disciples, himself, the people to whom he ministered, and the institutions of his day. In each case, conflict was part

<sup>31</sup> David L. McKenna, *Power to Follow, Grace to Lead* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1989), 123.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 130–131.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>35</sup> Douglass G. Lewis, *Meeting the Moment: Leadership and Well-Being in Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 88.

of the setting in which revelation occurred. New alternatives were opened, new choices demanded, and new occasions for growth toward wholeness emerged."<sup>36</sup>

Jesus' Performing Stage, quantitatively and qualitatively, is the leader's goal in developing the incarnation team. Jesus soon sent His disciples into the field two by two. Jesus told them what to wear, what to take with them, to whom to talk, and when to leave (Mark 6:8-10). And also, Jesus empowered His followers to experience the joys and challenges of preaching, teaching, and healing. As a servant-leader, Jesus "understood the importance of the team and exerts great effort in building the team,"<sup>37</sup> and "he wasted no time in forming a team."<sup>38</sup>

#### 4.4 Relationship: Among, Not Over

Jesus is a person who is among, not over those whom He leads. He values the relationship between Himself and the disciples in order to be closer to each other. The *over* relationship means that communication is normally done through one-way channels. That is, the one *over* normally communicates directive-type data *down*; the one *under* normally communicates response-type data *up*.<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, an *among* relationship places persons on the same level. When we see another person on our level, we normally perceive him/her as like us, which allows to share ideas, feelings, thoughts, attitudes. An *among* relationship freely shares in the give-and-take of self-revelation and mutual ministry.<sup>40</sup> An *among* relationship treats others as equals. Jesus declared Himself to be related to God yet mingled with prostitutes, thieves, and tax collectors. Jesus, representing God, treated everyone as His equal, His brother and sister (Matt 12:49-50), and He showed respect by meeting people where they were and accepting them for who they were (Matt 8:9; Luke 19:5; John 4:7-26). In the light of this acceptance, people wanted to be better, try harder, and do the good and right thing. His respect empowered them.

<sup>36</sup> Lewis, *Meeting the Moment: Leadership and Well-Being in Ministry*, 93.

<sup>37</sup> Lewis H. Weems Jr., *Church Leadership: Vision, Team, Culture and Integrity* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 70.

<sup>38</sup> Laurie Jones, *Jesus CEO: Using Ancient Wisdom for Visionary Leadership* (New York, NY: Hyperion, 1995), 90.

<sup>39</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, *A Theology of Christian Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 133.

<sup>40</sup> Richards, *A Theology of Christian Education*, 133.

In another way, an *among* relationship represents a leader being with the people. Jesus promised His disciples His continued presence, "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:20). Lewis Weems says, "It is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to be a leader without generous presence, time, and attention with the people who look to you as the leader. That presence will take many shapes, forms, and expressions."<sup>41</sup> To be among others emphasizes equality and identity between persons. This relationship has communication that flows between the parties.

## 5. Conclusion

Servant leadership emerges from having a close relationship with God. It is knowing God, His call, and His purpose in Christ. Jesus molded love by serving others. He told His disciples that the way to greatness was found in being a servant to others (Mark 10:43). Jesus willingly surrendered His position of power to humbly and sacrificially serve humanity through His death on the cross.

Jesus is the embodiment of servant leadership based on love. He became a human being in order to build a relationship with humanity. Through His death on the cross Jesus gave the example of how leaders must emulate His self-sacrifice and give of themselves to lead others to Him.

To be a servant leader following the example of Jesus is neither easy nor natural. It requires hard training and continuous exercise. It is not a matter of skills or capability but a matter of the heart and perception. It is contrary to the self-centered tendencies of humankind. Consequently, servant-leaders should seek to emulate Jesus; serving others is the example that Jesus left for His followers. He abandoned all that He had before He came to this earth: glory, adoration, power, authority, comfort, and even creatorship. Humility and sacrifice marked the path that Jesus took, which in turn placed Him to the right hand of God. Love made it all possible! This same route will lead servant-leaders to greatness in the kingdom of God.

The church is engaged in a continuing mission to reach the world for Jesus. This challenge in an entirely relativistic environment calls for a fresh look at servant leadership in order to face the problems that are looming ahead. The need for humility in leadership training is *sine qua non*. Young people should be encouraged to wear the garb of humility as they take on the mantle of leadership from the older generation. To have a

<sup>41</sup> Weems, *Church Leadership*, 83–84.

humble opinion is the attitude they need to learn. The ability to follow instructions and obey principles must be made clear. This is the only way of ensuring that the leaders of tomorrow are well equipped to lead.

Servant leadership encapsulates the essential qualities of humility, obedience, and simplicity of Jesus. Learning these abiding principles from Jesus is the way out of the problems that leadership faces in the postmodern church.