



servant  
**LEADERSHIP**

Setting Leaders Free

Jane L. Fryar

**CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP SERIES**



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# Preface

This book takes the Holy Bible as God's Word and seeks to draw from it lessons on leadership. At the same time, like other volumes in Concordia's Leadership Series, I will apply here what we might call "First Article knowledge" to leadership processes in the church. This kind of knowledge comes from researchers who study the world God created. While it is not theology drawn directly from the Bible, it is truth that can support and augment theology. Over the past six decades or so, scholars in organizational studies have developed many ideas helpful to those who lead God's people. Built on sound principles of psychology and sociology, leadership theory can guide those who want to lead others with skill and courage.

Some in the Christian community have rejected all organizational theories because some scholars' ideas clash with the truths revealed in the Holy Scriptures. When theories contradict Holy Scripture, we must reject them. They are dangerous to faith and life in the body of Christ. Yet while filtering out the "camels" and even the "gnats" Jesus warned us about (Matthew 23:24), Christian leaders will want to take advantage of ideas and methods that can strengthen their leadership skills and abilities. Our Lord wants to equip us in every way

“with everything good for doing His will,” even as He works in us “what is pleasing to Him” (Hebrews 13:21). He does this, in part, through “First Article” truths.

This book presents one model for leaders in the church—servant leadership. Though I see it as congruent with Scripture and worthy of study, other models also grace the pages of the Holy Scriptures. I pray that this brief study will encourage others to explore what Scripture has to say about leadership in the church. I also pray that it will provoke Christian leaders to dig into more of the organizational scholarship that is available to us.

God wants His people to be not only well-fed but well-led. Every leader in the church I have ever known has wanted to lead God’s people well. May God grant us wisdom to discern the truth about leadership—wherever we may find it. And may He grant us grace to apply that truth for the good of the church and the glory of our Savior!

# Servant Leadership

**H**ow do leaders do what they do? What does Bill Gates have in common with Mother Theresa, for example? Why do some people with no official recognition or title attract a loyal following, while others lead in title only? Questions like these have fascinated people for a long time. Centuries before Christ, Plato wrote about leadership in *The Republic*. Despite this long history, scholars did not begin to study leadership in a scientific way until recently. Over the past five decades, theorists have examined various pieces of the leadership puzzle—leader traits, leader behaviors, and the effects that various contexts or contingencies exert on leaders and followers.

After examining the components, leaders in the real world of Monday morning's e-mail and Friday evening's traffic jam need ways to put the puzzle back together again. They need practical direction in leadership. As hierarchical approaches to leadership disappear in business and society in general and as organizations shift away from top-down, autocratic modes of leadership, leaders need to understand how to optimize new models of organizing. Leaders need to know how to build consensus, how to motivate followers, how to improve

the quality and caring of our institutions. The theories and concepts of *servant leadership* can help.

Servant leadership takes a holistic view of the relationship between leaders and followers and the tasks they share. It takes into account the externals of leadership traits, behaviors, and circumstances. But it is rooted in the identity of the people to whom others look for leadership. It particularly focuses on the core beliefs and values leaders hold and cherish.

## From the Upper Room to the Board Room

In one sense, the terms “servant” and “leader” seem paradoxical, and “servant leadership” seems to be an oxymoron. Yet how crisply the term captures the earthly life and mission of our Lord Jesus: “I am among you as the One who serves” (Luke 22:27, NKJV). Remarkable words—especially when we consider who spoke them and when. It was Holy Thursday. The next day the Romans would lead a young Galilean preacher out to Calvary’s hill. There He would lie down on a rough-hewn cross, stretch His arms out wide, and die in an act of service that even now defies human understanding.

Jesus’ followers expected something quite different from Him. Their religious leaders demanded titles of reverence and respect. Their business leaders expected to be wined and dined, waited on hand and foot. Their political leaders pushed others around, taking full advantage of their positions of power. Jesus’ disciples

wanted exactly that kind of power and honor for themselves. A few moments before Jesus explained His own servanthood that night, His disciples had engaged in an ugly spat over which one of them most deserved the highest position in the coming Kingdom (Luke 22:24–29).

Many today likewise misconstrue the idea of leadership. Some in the church load it with connotations of supremacy, privilege, and power. Perhaps we covet positions of leadership so that we can have our own way or so that others will honor us. Perhaps our love of power reveals our sinful nature, ever rebelling against our Lord. But today Jesus still lives among us as “the One who serves.” He not only modeled a better way of life and of true leadership for us; He sacrificed Himself on the cross and rose again to remove the guilt of our selfishness and sinful pride. Through Word and Sacrament He is even now remaking us in His own image, creating within each of us a servant’s heart, a heart of compassion and love just like His own (Ephesians 2:4–10).

The idea of servant leadership really goes all the way back to God’s Old Testament people. Kings in ancient Israel were often called “shepherds.” The Lord held them responsible to serve His people, to protect, guide, instruct, and cherish their subjects, not to lord it over them or to “fleece the flock,” so to speak. (See Jeremiah 23:1–8.) But not even the Old Testament fleshed out the concept in all its fullness. To get the fullest picture of servant leadership, God’s people had to wait until God Himself took on human flesh to live and die among us.

In Jesus, humanity finally saw with its own eyes what true servant leadership is like (Philippians 2:5–11).

## Deep Identity

What *is* servant leadership? Advocates in the business world have noted with some degree of dismay that people often press them for a quick explanation of the concept. “That may not be possible,” Don Frick, an expert on servant-leadership issues, notes, “because [servant leadership] describes a process of inner growth and outer consequences that, though based on some universal principles, must necessarily take unique expression within particular individuals and institutions. . . . [When] servant leadership is reduced to a collection of admirable qualities and learned skills that are displayed in organizational settings, it is all too easy to forget that servant leadership is, first, about deep identity” (p. 354).

Robert Greenleaf was the first to popularize the term “servant leadership” and set down its foundational concepts. Servant leadership was indeed a part of his own “deep identity.” Greenleaf, a highly placed executive at AT&T for much of his adult life, made advocacy for servant leadership a kind of second career. At age 66, he wrote an article calling attention to servant leadership and its power. The article struck a chord with many readers, and, until his death in 1990, Greenleaf continued to promote servant leadership, teaching managers to practice it and challenging organizations to adopt it as they related to workers, clients, suppliers, and cus-

tomers. Still today the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership continues to promote his ideas.

While few would agree with everything Greenleaf proposed, no one can deny that his personal credibility helped to ignite a blaze of interest in servant leadership. Until recently, few scholars had studied the results of servant leadership in organizations. Researchers have now begun to gather evidence of its effectiveness. Ross Stueber, former director of school ministry for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, has shown a strong correlation between servant leadership and positive outcomes in Lutheran high schools headed by servant leaders.

The essence of servant leadership springs not from a leader's traits (e.g., kindness) or behaviors (e.g., goal setting). At its heart, servant leadership is identity-based. The servant leader's core identity and core values determine his or her attitudes and actions. Greenleaf warned that if we start with behaviors, enlarging them to mask our true identity, we have only a gimmick. We lose our authenticity—and followers always know it! As Frick has noted, the concept of servant leadership remains somewhat ambiguous, and its values defy definition by sound byte.

This helps explain the variety in the lists of servant-leader behaviors and attitudes drawn up by those who have attempted to describe the approach. In the course of working on this study, I collected more than 50 terms used to describe servant leaders, their values, attitudes, beliefs, and approaches toward followers. Most of the

behaviors and attitudes cluster around five values.<sup>1</sup> I will detail and defend the theological and organizational foundations for each of these value clusters in the chapters that follow. The list below simply introduces them:

- Servant leaders place a premium on service. This partly involves helping followers attain their own personal goals. Servant leaders also want to serve in such a way that their organizations thrive for the good of all organizational stakeholders and society in general. Both the individual member and the organization benefit from the leader's service.
- Servant leaders want each follower to live a life of significance and purpose. They use their intuition, experience, foresight, and insight to cast an encouraging, uplifting, and compelling vision of the future that energizes followers. Servant leaders focus followers' efforts on worthwhile goals, and they affirm and encourage followers.
- Servant leaders value the freedom and dignity of the individual. They rely on the art of persuasion to create consensus and community, instead of forcing compliance.
- Servant leaders want followers fully to develop their gifts and abilities. They are stewards of followers' gifts, appreciating their strengths and helping them develop and use their abilities. Servant leaders take risks by empowering others because they know that this ultimately strengthens organizations and brings fulfillment to the individual.

- Servant leaders value wholeness and growth for their followers and themselves. The power of forgiveness in Christ leads to healing and learning in their own lives, so they engage their organizations and followers in the healing quest as well.

Note that these are not a collection of random values; each strand is interwoven with the others. The value patterns result in attitudes that lead to specific actions. Robert Russell, in his work for the Regent University Center for Leadership Studies, has provided a working definition of servant leadership that illustrates the interlocking nature of these values, attitudes, and actions:

Servant leaders *seek not to be served, but rather to serve*. They view leadership positions as opportunities to help, support, and aid other people. Servant leaders create *trusting* work environments in which *people are highly appreciated*. They *listen* to and *encourage* followers. Servant leaders *visibly model* appropriate behavior and function as effective *teachers*. They have a high degree of *credibility* because of their *honesty, integrity, and competence*. These persons have a clear leadership *vision* and implement *pioneering* approaches to work. Servant leaders are also conscientious *stewards* of resources. They have good *communications* with followers and exercise ethical *persuasion* as a means of *influence*. Servant leaders invite others to participate in carrying out their leadership vision. They *empower* people by enabling them to perform at their best and by *delegating* decision-making responsibilities. Overall, servant leaders provide direction and guidance by assuming the role of attendant to humanity. (Emphasis original)

## Being and Doing

The influential psychologist Erik Erikson stressed identity formation. As we mature, our identity shapes our decisions and motivates our actions. The process by which human beings learn and live out an internalized identity does not lend itself to superficial description. It cannot be easily condensed into “Ten Steps Toward Becoming an Excellent Manager” or “Five Ways to Raise Great Kids.” Avoid the temptation to look for a prescription. Focus instead on the attitudes and motivations behind the examples and the actions described. Think more about *becoming* than about *doing*.

We cannot transform ourselves into Christlike servant leaders any more than a mud turtle can sprout wings and teach itself to fly. Our Lord teaches that He must work the metamorphosis we need (Romans 12:1–2). In the Sacrament of Holy Baptism we have been given a new identity. The Spirit continues to work that new identity in our hearts as He integrates our thoughts and desires, shaping us daily into the image of Christ Himself. Isaiah describes Christ as the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53). As we meditate on Jesus’ great love and sacrifice for us on Calvary, we ourselves become more intent on serving others. As always, only Christ alive in us and working through the Word can do what must be done (Philippians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Robert Kolb, systematic theology professor at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, describes this process:

Death to sin and resurrection with Christ through Baptism restores the righteousness of which Paul had been speaking in [Romans] 3–5. God freely bestows this righteousness. . . . That righteousness constitutes our fundamental identity as children of God. Sin no longer determines the identity of the baptized human creature, for it is not the constitutive or defining element of our life any longer. Christ has rendered the body of sin powerless: that is because our old selves have been crucified in our Baptisms. We no longer bear the brand of the slave-master sin, the mark of mortality. The Second Adam has triumphed over death. Because he has joined the believer to himself through Baptism, death no longer has mastery over the believer (Romans 6:6–9). (p. 36)

## Christians Leaders, Servant Leaders?

As Christians, we might be tempted to claim the core values of servant leadership as “ours.” After all, the command to love and serve others permeates much of the New Testament. Yet we must admit that many world religions commend the values, attitudes, and approaches prized by the proponents of servant leadership.

Can a Buddhist, for instance, become a servant leader? Yes, in one sense. Such behavior falls under the category the Reformers called “civil righteousness” or “the righteousness of reason.” God has given even unbelievers the capacity to function in a moral and civil way in society. They can care for their children, support the Red Cross, and volunteer at the Humane Society. On the job, they can put in an honest day’s work and

even delight many with the products or services they provide.<sup>2</sup>

People of all faiths and of no faith have expressed interest in servant leadership as it has grown in popularity over the past decade or so. Scholars and practitioners alike have produced a small mountain of materials defining and promoting the theory. God's children find that much of this material agrees with Scripture and gives helpful insights on ways all organizations, including Christian ones, can function better. However, some theorists have generated books and articles that can potentially harm the immature or undiscerning Christian. For that reason, I do not endorse everything on the market that carries the label "servant leadership." If you decide to explore this subject outside the community of believers, stay alert.

I hope that the framework provided here will help believers—particularly those who lead Christian congregations, schools, and other organizations—build a Christ-centered understanding of servant leadership. I have attempted to integrate what the Scriptures reveal concerning Christlike leadership with the many aspects of servant leadership that are congruent with the Christian faith.

God's people can benefit from a deeper understanding of what it means to lead and follow in the church. Few Christian organizations are as healthy or well led as they might be. Many congregations chew up their pastors and lay leaders. Professional church workers sometimes abdicate their God-given leadership role or resort