

THE HEART OF THE SERVANT LEADER

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Introduction

I am challenged by the words of “The Servant’s Song” in our hymnal (# 679).

Remember the first two verses of the hymn?

*Brother, let me be your servant; let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.*

*We are pilgrims on a journey; we are brothers on the road.
We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.*

Each time I sing this hymn, however, I am haunted by a question. Is it really possible to be a servant—a servant leader—in the real world of the local church or in an educational institution of the church with all of the conflicting expectations, demands, and pressures placed on us?

Let me express my concern differently. What will constitute “success” in our leadership ministry? The way we define success will determine our leadership focus.

My contention is that, regardless of where God places us as leaders within the Christian fellowship, we need—we must have at the core of our being—at least three compelling convictions:

1. A **vision** for who we are as the people of God;
2. A **passion** for what we are called to do in the work of God; and
3. An **obsession** for how we live together as the family of God.

These convictions are the heart of servant leadership. They comprise the essence of The Servant’s Song.

Let’s look more closely at these convictions to which the servant leader is captive.

Conviction #1: Servant leadership is rooted in A VISION FOR MINISTRY.

Vision has to do with seeing things clearly and at a great distance. It is seeing what others do not see. A vision is a consuming, fervent, and compelling inner picture. All leaders are supposed to have *vision*. Fundamental for the servant leader is not so much organizational *vision*, but theological *vision*.

Foundational to the servant leader is a theological vision of our identity within the Christian fellowship. Listen to the biblical images of our relationship to others:

- brothers and sisters in Christ,
- fellow travelers on a spiritual journey,
- members together of Christ's body,
- a fellowship of God's people,
- a microcosm of the Kingdom of God on earth,
- a community of faith,
- a sacramental community in and through which the grace of God flows.

Effective leadership within the Christian fellowship, I believe, is grounded in this biblical perspective of our identity, and not in organizational skills. Skills, of course, are needed. However, sharp skills without Christian motives easily lead to manipulation. The primary orientation and motivation of our actions as servant leaders must be deeply theological. The degree to which we remain captive to this conviction will determine the degree to which our leadership is judged "successful" in biblical perspective.

Affirming the identity of those with whom we work within the fellowship is fulfilling. However, the servant leader gets equally excited about helping others succeed—regardless of where they are on their spiritual journey.

Ministry, as you know, is service to others in Jesus' name. It is the extension of the service of Jesus in our world. The people of God are Spirit-empowered to incarnate His healing, guiding, sustaining, and reconciling work in the lives of those with whom we work and live. If we are Christian, we are called to this ministry.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together*, lists seven expressions of ministry by which a Christian community must be judged and characterized.

- The Ministry of Holding One's Tongue
- The Ministry of Meekness
- The Ministry of Listening
- The Ministry of Active Helpfulness -- Simply assisting others within the Christian community in trifling, external matters.
- The Ministry of Bearing (Supporting)
- The Ministry of Proclaiming (enfleshing the Word of God through our words and deeds)
- The Ministry of Authority (Leadership)

For Bonhoeffer, these practical expressions of Christian ministry provide the *context* within which our specific calling must function.

We may be specifically called to and gifted as pastor, teacher, evangelist, musician, or missionary. But it is futile and self-defeating to seek to function within a specific calling *while ignoring our broader ministry to serve others in Jesus' name*.

In the book, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology*, Dr. J. Kenneth Grider, highly esteemed professor emeritus of Nazarene Theological Seminary, reflects on his own need to grow in grace through service. He shares in his book a prayer he often prays.

Father, I am Your bread. Break me up and pass me around to the poor and needy of this world.

I am Your towel. Dampen me with tears and with me wash the feet of people who are weary with walking and with working.

I am Your light. Take me out to where the darkness is thick, there to shine and let Christ shine.

I am Your pen. Write with me whatever word You wish, and placard the word where the least and the lost of the world will see it and read it and be helped by it.

I am Your salt. Sprinkle me on all the things that You want for people, so that my faith and love and hope will flavor their experiences.

I am Your water. Pour me into people who thirst for You but do not even know that it is You for whom they thirst. Pour into them the trust that You have helped me to place in You. Pour into them the inward witness that is in me. Pour into them the promise that soon the summer drought will pass and refreshing rivers of water will gush down over them.

I am Yours, Lord God. Use me up in what You will, when You will, where You will, for whom You will, even if it means that I am given responsibilities that are considerable and costly. Amen!!

Jesus defined success in Christian ministry in terms of service or self-giving to others in the name and place of God (Matthew 25:30-34). The call and command to serve must increasingly define and shape our vision for ministry.

Conviction #2: Servant leadership is rooted in A PASSION FOR FORMATION.

Eighteen years ago, while teaching at the European Nazarene Bible College, I penned this definition of Christian leadership.

Christian leadership, I believe, is humble service to others in the community of faith whose head is Christ for the purpose of enabling them, through teaching and example, to live their lives under the Lordship of Christ, and to understand, accept, and fulfill their ministry to each other and their mission in the world.

Leadership, according to the late Dr. Harold Reed, “is known by the personalities it enriches, not by those it dominates or captivates.” Our leadership within the community of faith must convictionally focus on the qualitative growth of the led as ministers of Jesus Christ.

This perspective on leadership forces us to ask some probing questions. How can our ministry of servant leadership enable *others* to fulfill *their* ministry to each other and *their* mission in the world? Are the people being served growing as Christians? Are they themselves becoming servants? These are crucial concerns for leadership in the community of faith.

ALL Christians - yes, even those with whom we work who sometimes make life so difficult - are *called* and gifted for the ministry of Christ. We must not ignore these challenging people. These individuals, as impossible as it may seem on some occasions, remain our responsibility. They, too, need to be enabled “through teaching

and example, to live their lives under the lordship of Christ, and to understand, accept, and fulfill their ministry to each other and their mission in the world.”

This conviction regarding our responsibility for those with whom we work demands keen insight, deep “caring,” and Spirit-empowered understanding. “Only the person who can see the invisible can do the impossible,” I once read. Questions such as “what if...” and “why not...” ought to permeate our mind set regarding the Christians with whom we work. What if...they were all called to Christian ministry? Why not...assume they are, and proceed accordingly!

If we are driven by this passion for formation, then ministry *to* the people, and ministry *for* the people will become ministry *with* the people and ministry *by* the people.

Let’s review. Conviction #1: Servant leadership is rooted in a vision for ministry, and #2, in a passion for formation.

Conviction #3: Servant leadership is rooted in AN OBSESSION FOR COMMUNITY.

Jesus challenges us in Luke 6:40, “When a student is fully trained he will become like his teacher.” (Or his school president, or his seminary prof, or his pastor!) Ministry is always incarnated and enfolded. Ministry must be lived out!

What is it about ourselves that we want our community—our students and faculty, or our parishioners—to catch from us? We want our people to catch from us a servant spirit, committed to *motivating, equipping and enabling others to also serve in Jesus’ name.*

What we are confronted with is the need to communicate a lifestyle within the community that is distinctly Christian - and self-giving at the core. But how do you communicate a lifestyle? How do you teach commitments, priorities, values, and spiritual disciplines? How do you teach a lifestyle?

Whatever else it means, it demands taking seriously the principle of imitation. Herbert Mayer, in his book, *Pastoral Care, Its Roots and Renewal*, reminds us that this principle was a key in Christian leadership for eighteen centuries. We must recapture this principle if we take seriously the biblical mandate to be an example to believers.

Recall the words of the Apostle Paul:

- *Follow me as I follow Christ.*
- *You ought to follow my example.*
- *Put into practice what you have learned, received or heard from me or seen in me.*
- *We did this in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow.*

Paul gave these instructions with humility to the Christians under his care. We must do the same for those for whom we are responsible.

Justin Martyr, Tertullian, John Chrysostom, Martin Luther, Richard Baxter and John Wesley, to name only a few, were not hesitant to claim their responsibility to be an example to their believers.

The broad principle of imitation must possess us if we are to effectively transfer our vision, passion, and obsession within the Christian fellowship. This principle is developed and made specific in Ephesians 4:25-32. The passage outlines a servant leadership lifestyle within the Christian community.

Chapter four begins with the challenge to walk worthy of our calling as Christians. The characteristics of the person "walking worthy" follow the challenge. We are instructed to be gentle, humble, patient, and supportive of each other. In so living, we will "maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace" (v. 3).

But, as Christian *leaders*, how do we express gentleness, humbleness, patience, and supportiveness? The key leadership principle captivating the leader in community is found in Ephesians 4:15 - "speak the truth in love," and this critical concept is fleshed out in verses 25-32.

Paul, in these verses, is not so much talking about administrative techniques, but Christian attitudes underlying our actions and activities within the community. We are co-laborers together in the body of Christ (v. 25). We relate with others in the fellowship out of an "I-Thou" frame of reference. The people with whom we work are God's own creation.

Because of this fundamental Christian conviction, we can *be honest*...with the believers; *immediate*...in dealing with conflict among us; *upbuilding*...with our words; and *forgiving*, even when others do not forgive us.

We express, therefore, gentleness, humbleness, patience, and supportiveness through words and deeds which consistently communicate:

I love you,
I accept you,
I respect you,
I need you,
I trust you,
I serve you,
I forgive you, and
I accept your forgiveness.

Words and deeds done by others to us must never be permitted to create bitterness and resentment within us.

An obsession for community is not an option for the servant leader. It is an imperative, even in conflictual situations. Because relationships are so important to us, we "care enough to confront" our brother or sister in Christ. We care too much about the relationship to ignore destructive behavior. We speak the truth in love, and we care enough to allow our brother or sister in Christ to speak truthfully to us.

Paul's instructions are not psychological in nature; they are deeply theological. The Spirit of God is deeply concerned with the speech of His people (Eph. 4:30a).

These instructions may not be found in the latest secular textbook on leadership. They are foundational for servant leaders who take seriously the principle of imitation, and who want their faith community to catch from them a servant spirit.

As I conclude ...

Let me share with you a question I ask myself. "What does it mean to be a servant to my students, faculty, and staff where I must function in the role of college president?" What does it mean to be a servant in the midst of *all* the expectations, roles, and functions?

And what about the risks? Misunderstandings? Abuses? Betrayals? Pain? Hurts? Is it worth the risks? Is it really worth the risk of being a servant leader?

I am growing in my understanding of the profoundness of my questions. Slowly, but with inner confidence, I am developing a deep conviction--theologically grounded-

-that I must accept the risks and serve my people with humility, gentleness, patience, and encouragement if I am to be a servant leader.

And you, too, will be challenged to find such responses in the situations you face or will face! Our people will not see us as finished products. Rather, they will discover in us an on-going process of transformation into Christlikeness (II Cor. 3:18).

A student of mine gave me a poem by Leonard Nimoy while I served on the faculty of European Nazarene Bible College. It reads:

*What mark will I leave behind?
How will anyone ever know that I've been here?
What sign will tell the future traveler that I've existed?
Shall I carve it on the door?
"I am here! Today, I exist!"
I believe the deepest impression is made in the moments when I can say,
"I care; I love."*

The poem captures the heart of the servant leader.

What mark will you leave behind when you depart your present or your next leadership assignment?

I believe the deepest impressions will be made in those moments when you say, I love you, I care for you, I am your brother or sister in Christ, I will serve you regardless of the costs, ignoring the risks, and the conflicting roles, functions, expectations, and misunderstandings.

Our challenge is to lead with a servant's heart. If we are captured by a vision for ministry, motivated by a passion for ministry formation, and characterized by an obsession for a servant leadership lifestyle within the community, then our group--regardless of its size--will be life-giving, growth-producing, and *distinctly Christian*. In

addition, this vision, passion, and obsession will increasingly empower our responsibility groups to reach out and serve others in Jesus' name.

This is servant leadership! To *this* ministry we are uniquely called. We measure our success in ministry by *this* standard!

*Brother/sister, let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you.
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.*

May it be so, Lord. Amen!