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# Leaders as Servants: a Resolution of the Tension

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## I The Issue

Christian leadership is meant to be different from other forms of leadership because Christian leaders are called to be servants. Jesus stated the distinctive mandate of Christian leaders succinctly when he said to his disciples,

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 a ransom for many (Matt. 20:25-27).<sup>1</sup>

The way in which Jesus characterised the Roman and secular leaders of his day may have been a stereotype but it was close enough to the truth for no one to want to contradict him. Leadership was masculine, powerful and concerned with status. It was dedicated to accomplishing the task, no matter what the cost to ordinary people. But Christ introduced a new way of leading which was to be incumbent on all his followers, that of leading by serving, even sacrificial service.

In introducing this form of leadership, however, Jesus posed a problem for his disciples which many still find it hard to resolve. How can one simultaneously be a leader and a servant? Are not the roles of leader and servant irreconcilable? Do they not call for opposing abilities and characteristics? Are they not more readily in conflict with each other than in harmony? The popular image assumes leaders command and servants obey; leaders determine the direction and servants follow. Leaders supply vision and strategic thinking; servants deal with the mun-

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1 NIV Inclusive Language edition is used throughout this article.

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dane and everyday maintenance jobs. Leaders are proactive; servants are reactive.

The tension is a very real one for many pastors who daily seek to practise servant leadership, often putting themselves under some degree of stress as they do so. Trained to preach, teach and lead in mission, many pastors end up putting out the chairs, dealing with the plumber and locking up the church—more caretaker than pastor. Seeking to avoid the constant worry of being able to affirm that they are both leading and serving, some resolve the tension by emphasising one pole at the expense of the other.

So, some pastors are task orientated, visionary, achievers, committed to forging forward, even if it means leaving those who cannot keep up with them behind. To these pastors, the church in the West has floundered long enough, been complacent about its mission, and too defeatist in accepting decline. The church must change and adapt to exercise a ministry which is active and relevant to today.

Others shun such images of leadership and seek to serve their flocks and meet their every need. They will often find themselves undertaking menial tasks and putting themselves out to keep the flock contented and, as much as possible, united. It means the pace of any change is often set by the slowest of the sheep and great attention is shown to the stragglers in the flock. These stereotypes—the pastor as leader and the pastor as servant—may be overdrawn, but not by much.

The questions this poses are: is there not a better way to understand servant leadership and is this what Jesus had in mind when he taught it to

his disciples? How do these twin aspects of Christian governance cohere? How can they be integrated?

On a wider scale, the history of the church suggests some forms of ministry have focused on the one almost to the exclusion of the others.<sup>2</sup> The more radical wing of the church is very suspicious of the language of leadership and shuns anything that places one group of Christians on a higher plane than another, rejecting anything that smacks of a clergy/laity divide. The more institutional wing of the church is more at home in the secular world of national, political or business affairs and more relaxed about hierarchies and leadership and more cautious about emphasising servanthood too much. In its extreme forms this was evidenced in the ‘prince bishops’ that were once common, at least in the English and Roman churches during much of their histories.

## II The Biblical Basis

Give the recurring tendency for individuals and institutions to resolve the tension of servant leadership by deferring to one pole rather than the other it will be helpful briefly to review what the Bible teaches in respect of both.

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<sup>2</sup> This relates to the sect-church typology introduced by Ernst Troeltsch with the sect tending to equality and the church tending to hierarchy. But the correspondence is not exact as a number of sects are, in reality, quite hierarchical. See, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Church*, vol. 1 (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931), 331-343.

## 1. Leaders

It is not uncommon to read comments that suggest leadership is downplayed in the New Testament. Mark Storm, for example, 'Paul avoided the vocabulary of leadership...preferring (instead) to use metaphors of service and care from work and the household'.<sup>3</sup> It is undoubtedly true that Paul never describes pastors as leaders of congregations, presiding over church activities and services and as being the head of a complex organisation. It is also true, as we shall see, that he stresses that leaders were servants. But to draw the implication that leadership, as such, was unimportant or a topic to be avoided in the New Testament would be misleading.

First, we must acknowledge that a great deal of attention is paid to leaders and leadership in the Bible as a whole. The form and focus of leadership varies over time. The Patriarchs give way to the tribal leaders who then acknowledge the authority of Moses, the exceptional leader, and his heir Joshua, and who are then followed by Judges who summon the tribes as a whole to fight for deliverance from oppression. This period of 'erratic' leadership gives way, first to the leadership of the priest, Samuel, and then to the more regular pattern of kingship, with all its attendant problems (1 Sam. 8:1-21). Kings did not rule alone but in conjunction with the priests and wise men of Israel, and the Prophets, who came largely from outside the

institutional structures (Jer.18:18). Concurrent with all these forms of leadership the role of the family head continued to be influential.<sup>4</sup>

The Old Testament suggests that leadership is essential if any society is to be healthy. Hence Moses pleaded with God to 'appoint someone over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the Lord's people will not be sheep without a shepherd' (Num. 27:18). The absence of leadership tends to weakness and chaos, as the book of Judges demonstrates (Jdg. 21:25).

In the light of all this it would be surprising if there was no concern about leadership in the church. But there is, as a brief but far from exhaustive study establishes. Consider the following:

- The metaphor of the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18) applies not only to Jesus Christ but in a derived sense to the 'under-shepherds' in the church (Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11 and 1 Pet. 5:1-4). The metaphor of the shepherd not only had overtones of the person who feeds, protects and leads the flock but also of ruling over it. In the ancient world the shepherd was a metaphor for the king and carried connotations of authority.<sup>5</sup>
- Leadership is demonstrated throughout the Acts by the apostles and elders

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller exposition see, Derek Tidball, *Skilful Shepherds: Explorations in Pastoral Theology* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997), 31-54.

<sup>5</sup> E. Beyreuther, 'Shepherd', *NIDNTT*, vol. 3, 564-569, J. Jeremias, 'poimēn' *TDNT*, 6:485-502 and Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds after My own Heart* (Downers Grove: IVP and Leicester: Apollos, 2006), 58-74.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Strom, *Reframing Paul: Conversations on Grace and Community* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 180.

under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

- Paul appointed elders and recognised deacons as leaders in the church (Acts 14:23 and Phil. 1:1). While not too much is made of them, their existence is established. Furthermore, Paul encouraged the church to submit to its household leaders (e.g., 1 Cor. 16:15-16; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; 1 Tim. 5:17).
- The metaphor of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-31) implies structure and order, with some parts providing direction to other parts. Paul writes of God having placed in his church 'first apostles, second prophets and third teachers' (1 Cor. 12:28) and so places them in a guiding role in the church.
- While there is much dispute about the actual meaning of the terms and the role they indicate, the Pastoral Letters<sup>6</sup> make clear the church had leadership in the form of elders (*presbuteroi*) or overseers (*episcopoi*)<sup>7</sup> and deacons (*diakonia*).<sup>8</sup> In addition, they show clear apostolic leadership being exercised, through authority delegated to Timothy and Titus, because of Paul's restricted circumstances.
- In spite of shunning language that inflates his role Paul describes himself in 1 Corinthians 3:10 as an *architektōn*,

that is, a master or an expert builder. The suffix *archē* usually refers to a ruling authority.

- Among the spiritual gifts that Paul mentions in Romans 12:8 is that of leadership. The word he uses, *proistēmi*, is used in Greek literature to mean 'to lead, conduct, direct, govern'.<sup>9</sup> It is used altogether eight times in the New Testament, mostly to refer to leadership, but, as Bo Reicke points out, usually in the context of caring for others, (as is explicit, for example, in 1 Thess. 5:12).<sup>10</sup> A related term is that of the pilot (*kubernetes*) in 1 Corinthians 12:28.<sup>11</sup>
- The role of the teacher implies leadership and authority (1 Cor. 4:6; Col. 1:28, 1 Tim. 2:7; 6:1; 2 Tim. 1:11).
- Leadership language is to be found elsewhere in Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24. Significantly, Hebrews uses the secular word *hēgoumenoi* for church leaders without any embarrassment. The term is usually used of military leaders, princes, pagan priests and other great men.<sup>12</sup>
- John Elliott's careful examination of Jesus' disciples and the community of the early church has convincingly concluded that neither was an egalitarian movement. Not only is egalitarianism a

<sup>6</sup> Whatever one's view of the authorship of these letters they (and Ephesians) are part of the Pauline corpus and will be treated as authentic primary evidence, not to be relegated to some secondary division.

<sup>7</sup> I take *presbuteroi* and *episcopoi* to be interchangeable. See my *Ministry by the Book: New Testament Patterns of Pastoral Leadership* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 151-157.

<sup>8</sup> On *diakonia* see further below.

<sup>9</sup> Rieke, '*proistēmi*', *TDNT*, 6:700.

<sup>10</sup> Rieke, '*proistēmi*', *TDNT*, 6:701-703. Reicke writes, this emphasis 'agrees with the distinctive nature of office in the NT, since according to Lk. 22:26 the one who is chief (*ho hēgoumenos*) is to be as he who serves'.

<sup>11</sup> For an exposition see, Derek Tidball *Builders and Fools: leadership the Bible way* (Leicester: IVP, 1999), 103-21.

<sup>12</sup> F. Buchsel, '*hegeomai*' *TDNT*, 2:908.

modern concept, which it is anachronistic to impose on the writings of New Testament, but the overwhelming use of family language undermines egalitarianism. Families are warm, personal and living organisms but also small face-to-face communities in which people adopt defined roles and operate with different degrees of authority.<sup>13</sup>

- Negatively, it should be said that the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, does not, rightly understood, imply equality of leadership. This doctrine concerns equality of access to God but it is a confusion to assume this implies that everyone is a leader in the church. It does not and to abuse it in this way would be to conflict with what has been said above, and especially the concept of the church as a body.
- Everywhere, however, the character of the leadership mentioned is different from the accepted patterns of leadership in wider society. Elsewhere, leaders are concerned about title, status, position and the honour they are due. They would be quick to take offence and to defend their honour. Words for honour are significantly absent in any discussion of leadership in Paul's writings.<sup>14</sup> People were there to serve leaders, not to be served by them.

In contrast Paul delights in using the prefix *syn*, making himself a colleague rather than a superior to a host of other who work for the gospel (Rom. 16:2, 9, 21; 1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25; 4:3; Col. 1:7; 4:7, 10,11; Phlm. 1, 2, 23,24; 1 Thess. 3:2). And he provides a typical insight into Christian leadership as when he writes of Stephanus and his household that they 'have devoted themselves to the service of the Lord's people' (1 Cor. 16:15). Prevailing secular models of leadership are eschewed and new patterns put in place.<sup>15</sup>

Four conclusions can be drawn from this brief survey. They are that:

- the provision of proper leadership is a matter of frequent concern in the New Testament;
- the church is not egalitarian and leadership carries overtones of authority and governance;
- contrary to some contemporary Christians who are afraid to use business or military models of leadership the New Testament is not afraid to adopt secular terminology for its leaders, in spite of the counter-cultural nature of Christian leadership and potential misunderstanding in doing so;
- leadership is recast into servant and caring leadership.

**13** John H. Elliott, 'Jesus was not an egalitarian. A critique of an Anachronistic and Idealist Theory', *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 32 (2002), 75-91 and 'The Jesus Movement was not Egalitarian but Family-Oriented', *Biblical Interpretation*, XI (2003), 173-210.

**14** Andrew D. Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 233.

**15** The best discussion is in Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church*, *passim*. Clarke, however, does, I think, overstate his case in writing 'Avoiding the notion of leader, Paul did, however, regard himself as a servant' (250). See also his *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study in 1 Corinthians 1-6* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006)

## 2. Servant

The concept that the Christian leader is a servant is less disputed although there is one debate about it to which we shall come. Even those who do not model it in practice are unlikely to disagree with it in theory.

- Jesus presents himself consistently as a model of service. When his disciples were discussing when they would partake of the benefits of leadership, as conventionally understood, Jesus specifically contrasts his style of leadership with that of the Gentiles and says, 'for even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45 and parallels in Matt. 20:20-28 and Luke 24:27 in which the 'ransom' motif is absent).

- In a transparent demonstration of the principle, even though the language of *diakonia* is not used, Jesus washed his disciples' feet (John 13:1-17), telling them, 'I have set you an example that you should do as I have done' (John 13:15).

- In reflecting on the self-humbling of Christ, Paul describes Jesus as 'taking the very nature of a servant' (Phil. 2:7).

- Paul describes himself in a number of ways ('apostle', 'teacher' etc.) but most persistently as a 'servant' (*diakonos* = 1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 6:4; 11:23; Col. 1:23, 25; Eph. 3:7), or 'slave' (*doulos* = Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1; Tit. 1:1), or 'household steward' (*oikonomos* = 1 Cor. 4:1). He is variously serving God, Christ, the gospel or the church.

- Paul describes several of his fellow workers as servants, including Phoebe

(Rom. 16:1); Apollos (1 Cor. 3:5); Timothy (Phil. 1:1); Tychicus (Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7) and Epaphras (Col. 1:7; 4:12); as well as leaders in general (2 Tim. 2:24).

- In his most extended reflection on the matter Paul describes himself and Apollos as 'only servants' (*diakonoï*) and emphasises their unimportance and lowly status in contrast to how the Corinthians speak of themselves (1 Cor. 3:5-4:13).

- A local church leader, Stephanus, together with his household, as we have seen, are commended for having 'devoted themselves in the service of the Lord's people' (1 Cor. 16:15).

- More generally, serving one another is to be characteristic of the whole Christian community (Gal. 5:13).

- Other New Testament writers adopt the same stance. James describes himself as 'a servant (*doulos*) of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ' (Jas. 1:1)—a remarkable description if this James is the half-brother of Jesus, as is most likely. Peter (2 Pet. 1:1) and Jude (1) use the same term of themselves.

- 1 Peter 2:16 uses the term servant (*douloi*) to apply to all Christians but, without using the exact words, then teaches that leaders are to be servant leaders in a way that obviously echoes the teaching of Jesus (1 Pet. 5:1-4). They are shepherds who must not lord it over their flocks and must remember they are accountable themselves to the Chief Shepherd.

While the data here may be uncontroversial, the full meaning of *diakonos* is not. Traditionally it has been seen as referring to those who undertook menial tasks, such as waiting at

tables.<sup>16</sup> In a fairly recent monograph John Collins has re-examined the use of *diakonos* in Hellenistic Greek literature and his analysis leads him to conclude that although it often does refer to undertaking lowly tasks and household chores, in a significant number of cases it refers to the less menial task of being a go-between. The word is particularly used of those commissioned to deliver a message or carry out an activity on behalf of a god. It is also used of commercial activity as when a trader exports or imports goods.

So, he concludes, 'the sense of "to serve at table" cannot be called "the basic meaning" ... If the words denote actions or position of "inferior value", there is at the same time often the connotation of something special, even dignified, about the circumstances'.<sup>17</sup> So they do not necessarily carry a sense of low status or servility. True, the one serving is in a subordinate position to the one he serves and subject to his authority, 'and yet, as a representative of the one he serves, he carries the responsibility and authority that derives from the one he serves'.<sup>18</sup>

Collins does not see that the usage in the New Testament differs from this. Therefore, he argues, it is incorrect to see the term *diakonos* as always implying servility and referring only to the undertaking of menial jobs. Instead, the word indicates the high privilege of being the representative of God or Christ in the world and of bearing the message of the gospel. This puts it in an altogether different light.

Andrew Clarke declares himself 'unpersuaded' by Collins' discussion of the word in the Synoptic Gospels on which so much of his argument rests.<sup>19</sup> The notion of lowly status is present in a good number of references in the New Testament and in 2 Corinthians it is explicitly used in the context of Paul's suffering as an apostle. But the word is also used of a range of tasks and so, Clarke adjudges, in spite of the specific reservations, it is correct to say that subordination and servility are not 'essential ingredients(s)'<sup>20</sup> of the concept of *diakonia*.

As he points out, the use of the word in English, as when we speak, for example of the Civil Service or Military Services, does not necessarily involve doing unskilled tasks and on many occasions refers to positions of great standing as people serve as emissaries of the Government. To be a servant is not inevitably merely to be responsive to someone else's demand for the performance of a menial chore.

16 The noun *diakonos* does not occur in Acts 6 but the verb infinitive occurs of 'waiting on tables' (*diakonein trapezais*). Many have traditionally traced the origin of the diaconate to this passage.

17 J. N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 194.

18 Andrew D. Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership* Library of New Testament Studies (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 64. Clarke helpfully expounds and critiques Collins in pp. 63-67.

19 Clarke, *Church Leadership*, 66

20 Clarke, *Church Leadership*, 67.



### III Common Suggested Resolutions

Having seen that the New Testament affirms the importance of leadership but then defines Christian leadership in terms of being a servant, we are left with the conundrum as to how one can lead and serve simultaneously. Whilst national leaders and politicians often speak of the idea of leading as a serving vocation, the reality is often quite different. Leadership involves high status, at the very least, making it difficult for those who are ranked more lowly to do other than comply with what leaders say. A degree of authority or power,<sup>21</sup> not just status, is nearly always inherent in leadership and power is insidiously corrupting. It is likely in some measure to colour even the most innocent act of service. So how can they fit together?

Several ways of seeking to resolve the tension are commonly proposed.

#### 1. Redefinition

A classic example of this is seen in Collins' proposal, outlined above, that the word *diakonos* did not imply adopting a lowly position and doing a menial task but could refer to people who held important commissions, carrying the authority and status of the one who commissioned them. Though the argument has some merit, it only reduces the problem rather than resolves it, for

*diakonos* continues to mean doing acts of lowly service much of the time.

Others have attempted to resolve the problem by widening the definition of leadership and thus removing the sting of power from it.<sup>22</sup> Influencing others is an essential ingredient of leadership but to define leadership solely as influence, and thus to suggest that in some respects we are all leaders, is to render the concept too vague and somewhat devoid of common sense meaning. It may be true, to a point, and is certainly helpful in encouraging leaders to accept that they cannot enforce their influence on others. Leaders need to recognise that leadership has to be a reciprocal transaction in which people are prepared to be influenced by them. But it is neither a sufficient definition of leadership, which involves other dynamics as well as influence, nor is it altogether useful in tackling the tension we are investigating.

So the redefinition of terms does not resolve the tension with integrity.

#### 2. Redemption

More helpfully, it has been suggested that the heart of the problem of the tension between being a leader and a servant lies in the power factor. In itself power may be morally neutral but given that it is channelled through us

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<sup>21</sup> I take the difference to be that while power may be imposed, whether it is accepted or not by those on the receiving end of it, authority is power which is legitimately recognised and willingly accepted.

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<sup>22</sup> An example is seen in David Cormack, *Team Spirit: People Working with People* (Bromley: MARC Europe, 1987), 9-10 and more recently see discussion in Walter C. Wright, *Relational Leadership: A Biblical Model for Leadership Service* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), 29-44.

who are fallen creatures, in spite of our salvation, it can too easily become a moral and spiritual liability. Tom Marshall has listed the potential pitfalls to which it leads as pride, arrogance, self-aggrandisement, insensitivity, domination and tyranny.<sup>23</sup> These can creep up on leaders without their realising that they have been ensnared by them. Marshall's answer is to suggest that power has been redeemed in the incarnation and by the cross of Christ on which the tyrannical powers of the world were defeated.<sup>24</sup>

Marshall suggests that in Christ the power issue has been settled. First, Christ put the Father's will, not his own, first. His action demonstrated, secondly, that the goal of every activity is to be the Father's glory. Success, achievement and results are never the end; the glory of God alone is the goal. And, thirdly, the cross we embrace in Christ means that we have 'died to all self-seeking, self-glorification and the will-to-power'.<sup>25</sup> If we are clear on this, then, it will follow through into the practice of a redeemed leadership.

This approach is much more beneficial than the previous attempted resolution because it is grounded in the theology which is at the heart of the gospel, namely that of the cross of Christ. But it perhaps suffers from being insufficiently linked to the practice and realities of everyday leadership.

### 3. Restricted understanding

A third way in which people have sought to resolve the conflict is to restrict the understanding of what it means to being a servant. Rather than relating it to doing a range of menial tasks people have said it is about the way any task is undertaken rather than what task is being undertaken. Tom Marshall, for example, explains, 'The first thing we have to get clear is that we are dealing with a question of character or nature, not a question of function'.<sup>26</sup> He then goes on to say this involves (1) always seeking the best interests of those they lead; (2) always finding satisfaction in the progress of those they lead; (3) willingly accepting the obligations of leadership; (4) having a desire to be accountable; (5) expressing caring love for those they lead; and, (6) being willing to listen.

The leader continues to lead and give direction. Ken Blanchard, an advocate of servant leadership, has written, 'I want to make it clear that when we're talking about servant-leadership, we aren't talking about lack of direction'.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the leader who fails to give direction fails as a servant of the body he is called to serve.

Having been a theological college principal, I served the college best by giving direction to its academic, financial, legal and spiritual management and to leading its staff. What made it servant leadership was that I was

<sup>23</sup> Tom Marshall, *Understanding Leadership* (Chichester: Sovereign World, 1991), 45-51.

<sup>24</sup> Marshall, *Understanding Leadership*, 55-65.

<sup>25</sup> Marshall, *Understanding Leadership*, 64.

<sup>26</sup> Marshall, *Understanding Leadership*, 68.

<sup>27</sup> Ken Blanchard, 'Servant-Leadership Revisited' in *Insights on Leadership*, ed. Larry C. Spears (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1998), 23.

called to do this without arrogance and pride, and by putting the needs of the college as an institution, and of its staff and students, before my own. I might have looked more servant-like if I had acted as its caretaker, its maintenance man or its caterer and shifted the chairs around, done the odd jobs and repairs and done the cooking and washing up. I should not have been (and wasn't) above doing some of those tasks when necessary. But I did not serve the college by my undertaking those tasks. In fact, it would have been a failure in service for me to have done so. My skills did not lie in maintenance (as my wife knows) and the law forbade me to do the cooking as I did not have the necessary certificates. I served best by managing, rather than by interfering in the responsibilities which had been given to others.<sup>28</sup> The key issue was one of style rather than role.

The academic grounding for these views, as for those of many in this area, is found in the work of Robert K. Greenleaf who wrote a seminal work for business leaders, called *The Servant as Leader* in 1970.<sup>29</sup> In a later summary statement he speaks of it as leadership without hierarchy and says, 'The servant-leader is servant (not leader) first ... (It) begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. The servant-leader takes care first to make sure

that other people's highest priority needs are being met.'<sup>30</sup>

A whole industry has grown around the concept of servant-leadership and one participant, Joe Batten, has expanded Greenleaf's concept into thirty-seven values in his 'Manifesto for Tough-minded Servant-Leaders'.<sup>31</sup> In summary they are: openness and emotional vulnerability; warmth; consistency; unity; caring; positive listening; unstatisfaction (not dissatisfaction); flexibility; giving; involvement; tolerance of mistakes; values; psychological wages; simplicity; good use of time; winning formula = integrity + quality + service; open-mindedness; development of people; self-discipline; physical fitness; enjoyment of life; a broad perspective; faith in self and others; vision; positive thinking; a desire to learn; enjoyment of work; enrichment of others; integrity; results not activity; candour; management by example; a clear philosophy; accountability; purpose and direction; expectation of excellence; and, finally, laser-like focus.

How do we evaluate this approach? It has much to commend it and there is much from which I would not wish to dissent.<sup>32</sup> The discovery that the best form of leadership even in the business world is not one where leaders are tough bosses who have been trained to demonstrate the hard characteristics

<sup>28</sup> I recognise that in a smaller institution or church it may be necessary for the leader to undertake a range of these tasks as well as leading because of the lack of personnel.

<sup>29</sup> *The Servant as Leader* (Indianapolis: Robert Greenleaf Centre, 1970). See also, *Servant Leadership* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

<sup>30</sup> In Spears (ed.) *Insights on Leadership*, 19.

<sup>31</sup> Joe Batten, 'A Passion to Serve', in Spears (ed.) *Insights on Leadership*, 38-53.

<sup>32</sup> Wright helpfully applies much of it to Christian leadership in his *Relational Leadership*, 23-61.

of leadership but one more akin to that advocated by Jesus Christ is a positive gain.<sup>33</sup> To emphasise that one can do any job as a servant, and that this is what we should be doing, provides us with a true and significant understanding of leadership.

Yet there are some reservations. In one sense it does not completely resolve the tension between leadership and servanthood and it may even aggravate it, as it places leaders under renewed obligations. At face value, for example, making 'sure that other people's highest priority needs are being met' may be a snare around a Christian leader's neck. What people think of as their highest priority may not be a worthy priority at all. The Christian leader is called to critique people's misguided priorities not just to affirm them and attempt to meet them.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, however much we may wish to re-interpret the notion of service, and restrict it to the manner in which we fulfil our roles as leaders, an uncomfortable nagging thought remains that biblically-speaking, it does involve undertaking menial tasks, like washing people's feet!

Thirdly, we need to be aware that as the Greenleaf schools has expanded its teaching, so the definitions have come to reflect more and more American culture than biblical essentials. I doubt,

for example, if physical fitness, or enjoyment of life, or faith in self and others, or positive thinking, would have figured in Paul's understanding of what it was to be a servant! Indeed, in many respects the call to be a servant of Jesus was counter-cultural at precisely these points. As Ken Blachard has warned, 'when people talk about servant-leadership, Jesus is often a model, without even referring to (his) ultimate sacrifice'.<sup>35</sup>

The cross is the missing step in the argument. Some writings in this school smack more of contemporary American culture than of a true understanding of biblical servant leadership.

#### 4. Manipulation

Robert Greenleaf's venture into the field of servant-leadership came about through reading Herman Hesse's *Journey to the East* where a party of travellers, sponsored by a monastic order, are served by a man called Leo. He does their menial chores and sustains their spirits and then, one day, disappears with the result that the party fall to bits. Some time later the narrator of the story becomes a member of the Order and finds that Leo is its head and guiding spirit. He is adjudged as 'a great and noble leader'. While serving the group of travellers his true status was disguised but his true character was utterly transparent. On the basis of Philippians 2:5-11, we could say that he was patterning himself on Jesus, the one co-equal with God who chose to become a slave.

<sup>33</sup> Greenleaf is a Quaker and sees the concept as rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Robert Banks and Bernice C. Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership: A Christian Evaluation of Current Approaches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 108.

<sup>34</sup> See William Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 95-97.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted by Banks and Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership*, 110.

There is indeed something noble and Christ-like in this portrait. But there are also dangers. Satan is a master at taking what is good and, through a slight distortion, twisting it into something corrupt (2 Cor. 11:14). His influence plays on our still-sinful natures that lust for power, and easily twists this model with its emphasis on an unpretentious and healthy attempt at influencing people and turns it into a means of manipulation.

British comedy thrived throughout the twentieth century on the servant figure who demonstrated just that. P. G. Wodehouse's stories portray a hopeless aristocrat, Bertie Wooster, whose life is not only held together but controlled by his butler Jeeves. Equally amusing, and many say true to life, was the book and TV series *Yes, Minister*, in which an incompetent Government Minister is constantly being manoeuvred by his senior civil servant, Sir Humphrey. In both cases the servants in the lowly position exercise a controlling influence which is both necessary and benign without their superiors being in the least aware of it. There is a fine line, however, between humble service and manipulative control.

Paul's relations with the Corinthians could have taken this direction but in 2 Corinthians he repeatedly stresses the need for him as a Christian leader to shun the manipulation other public figures might have adopted and, as is consistent with the gospel, lead and speak plainly. Service can easily transform itself into control where this is absent.

#### IV A More Biblical Resolution?

Are these the only ways in which the

tension between leadership and service might be resolved? May not an examination of the broader context in which the twin poles of governance occur provide us with more clues?

It can be argued that the pervasive image of the band of disciples that gathered around Jesus, and the church that developed from them, is that of the family.<sup>36</sup> Other metaphors are certainly used of the church<sup>37</sup> but the overall framework and language is that of the family and household.<sup>38</sup> The household was the basic family structure of the time of the New Testament and although there may have been variation between Judea and the wider Greco-Roman world, Elliott points out, it was never egalitarian in form but always

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**36** See Elliott, 'Jesus was not an egalitarian' and 'The Jesus Movement was not Egalitarian but Family-Oriented'.

**37** E.g., Flock (John 10:1-21; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2), Body (1 Cor. 12:12-30; Eph. 4:11-13; Eph. 5:30; Col. 1:18), Bride (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-33; Rev. 19:7) and Army (Gal. 5:25-6:5 [employs military language throughout]; Eph. 6:10-18; 2 Tim 2:3).

**38** The evidence is pervasive and too numerous to detail. It is found in explicit references like Jesus' sayings in Mark 3:31-35 and 10:29-31 but is implicit throughout in the language of father, brother and sister, which occurs frequently. S. Scott Bartchy, states that Paul uses sibling language 118 times in the letters generally regarded as authentically Pauline alone, ('Undermining Ancient Patriarchy, The Apostle Paul's Vision of a Society of Siblings' *BTB*, 29 (1999), 70.) The church is referred to as 'the family of God' or 'of believers' (Gal. 6:10; 1 Pet. 4:17) and 'household' (Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15). Much use was made of the household structure in the mission of the early church and this influenced the shape of the church in its early days.

hierarchical.<sup>39</sup> He counters those who would read extensive egalitarianism into the New Testament in a number of ways. The texts that are read in this way 'are open to different and contrary interpretation' and there is no actual evidence of egalitarianism in the early church and it would have been a historical anachronism.<sup>40</sup> As to the key text often cited, Galatians 3:28, is, he argues, about the equal access of all to God by faith rather than about social or economic realities.<sup>41</sup>

Having cleared the confusion of interpretation caused by the imposition of recent egalitarian theory on the text, the way is now open to ask what early families were like in practice, particularly with regard to leadership and service. The most significant factor, it is commonly argued, is the place of the father in the Roman family and household. The *pater familias* was in a position of power within the family.<sup>42</sup>

The father ruled his children absolutely, even after they had reached the age of majority, as long as they were alive. The father also ruled over all females. Sons were trained for an aggressive and competitive role and 'to pursue a never-ending quest for honour and influence'.<sup>43</sup>

The near absolute and coercive authority was curtailed in practice by social pressures and was mitigated by a number of factors, such as the shortness of life expectancy.<sup>44</sup> The full powers may have rarely been invoked even while in force. So it is possible to distort the picture by an over-emphasis on the power of the father and there is evidence of much affection between children and their family. Sons grew up not only wishing to honour their father but imitate them too.<sup>45</sup> The Roman father also had great responsibilities in providing and protecting, nurturing and educating his children.

Patriarchy is a tricky concept and has become the *bête noir* of many libertarian and feminist theologians today, who frequently present a one-sided picture of it. It needs therefore to be approached with care and free from the assumption that it was always domineering, authoritarian and negative.

39 There is extensive literature on the household. See, *inter alia*, R. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1980), 33-43, 52-61; R. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of the Household Structure in Early Christianity* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004).

40 Elliott, 'The Jesus Movement was not Egalitarian but Family-Oriented', p. 175.

41 Elliott, 'The Jesus Movement, 178-187.

42 For a recent exposition see, S. Scott Bartchy, 'Who should be called "Father"? Paul of Tarsus between the Jesus Tradition and *Patria Potestas*', in *The Social World of the New Testament: Insights and Models*, Jerome H. Neyrey and Eric C. Stewart (eds.), 165-180; Stephen J. Jourbert, 'Managing the Household: Paul as *paterfamilias* of the Christian household group in Corinth', in *Modelling Early Christianity: Social Scientific studies of the New Testament in its context* (London and New York:

Routledge, 1995) pp. 213-223; and Eva Lassen, 'The Roman Family: Ideal and Metaphor', in *Constructing Early Christian Families* in Halvor Moxnes (ed.) (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) pp. 103-119.

43 Bartchy, 'Who should be called "Father"? 166.

44 Lassen, 'The Roman Family', 106-107.

45 Lassen, 'The Roman Family', 107, and W. P. de Boer, *The Imitation of Paul* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1962).

The patriarchal head of the family was quite capable of ruling without arrogance or loss of affection on the part of the family members he ruled. Galatians 3:26-4:7 gives some inkling, for example, of the qualitative difference of relationship enjoyed between a father and his sons and the *pater familias* and his slaves.

Jesus teaches that no man should be called 'Father' except God (Matt. 23:9) and yet Paul is happy, in a different context, to use the designation for himself,<sup>46</sup> although he restricts it to churches he had founded (1 Cor. 4:14; 1 Thess. 2:11) and he clearly relates to members of those churches as his children and therefore in an inferior position.<sup>47</sup> He claims authority over them, assumes the right of disciplining them (1 Cor. 4:14-21, 2 Cor. 10:8), and encourages them to imitate him (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:7).

In this respect Joubert is correct in his conclusion that in relation to Corinth, 'his authority as their *paterfamilias* was beyond dispute. Members who threatened the cohesion of the new family of believers were therefore disciplined in order to instil subordination and obedience to himself and restore harmony within the household.'<sup>48</sup> But this is not the whole story.

While apparently claiming the authority of the *pater familias*, at the same time, Paul also claims to be their servant (1 Cor. 3:5). Furthermore, it is the positive aspect of fatherhood rather than the authoritarian one that is uppermost in his relationship with his children. This is seen in his reminding the Thessalonians that 'you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory'. Bartchy summarises the position well: 'When Paul refers to himself as "father" ... he clearly intends to focus attention on a spiritual "begetting and on a nurturing relationship.'<sup>49</sup> He does not put himself forward as a ruling patriarch.

Gerd Theissen introduced the idea that Paul softened conventional patriarchy by revising it into the form of what he calls 'love-patriarchy'.<sup>50</sup> Love-patriarchy was essentially a compromise: the social structures were left in place but the wealthier members of the community were encouraged to be more considerate of and generous to their inferiors. His argument is based on Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians 11:27-34 and is found, he claims, 'most clearly in the household codes'<sup>51</sup> of Colossians 3:18-4:1 and Ephesians

<sup>46</sup> Bartchy has rightly pointed out that 'in the light of the patriarchal culture in which Paul was raised and continued to work, it must be striking that he avoids using the term "father" for leaders in his communities' S. Scott Bartchy, 'Undermining Ancient Patriarchy', 73.

<sup>47</sup> See my *Ministry by the Book*, 113-122.

<sup>48</sup> Joubert, 'Managing the household in Paul', 222.

<sup>49</sup> Bartchy, 'Undermining Ancient Patriarchy', 73.

<sup>50</sup> Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* trans. John Schütz (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), 164. Theissen owed the concept to Troeltsch.

<sup>51</sup> Theissen, *The Social Setting*, 164.

5:21-6:9. Love-patriarchalism was a negotiation between the sociological reality and a theological ideal.

Bartchy does not believe Theissen's concept of love-patriarchy is radical enough and dismisses his claim that Paul was not concerned to regulate social conflicts.<sup>52</sup> To Bartchy, Paul teaches that 'a house-church functions as the "Body of Christ" when and only when patriarchal values are reversed by giving its weakest and least honourable members the greatest honour' (1 Cor. 12:22-24).<sup>53</sup> This, however, seems to me to stress the ideal situation; the household codes and the letter to Philemon, as well as Paul's occasional use of his Roman citizenship (Acts 16:35-40; 22:22-29; 25:10-12), suggests Paul mostly worked within the given social structures and used them or subtly undermined them from within, rather than working for their abolition.

A recent study has challenged the whole approach which generates these debates and may point to an even better way of resolving the tensions than those proposed above. Kathy Ehrensperger has convincingly argued that to interpret Paul's authority on the basis of the Roman *pater familias* is to build on a false foundation. She proposes that Paul's discussion of authority resonates with the father/mother

discourse of the Second Temple period and has deep roots in the education tradition of Judaism.<sup>54</sup> As such, Paul's role was essentially functional rather than hierarchical and the primary objective is not one of maintaining dependence but of supporting their own growth and of empowerment.

This is further underlined by the fact that Christ was the pattern for their leadership. He was crucified in weakness (2 Cor. 13:4). He deconstructed hierarchy, and proclaimed a message of grace.<sup>55</sup> To be authentic, Christian leaders have to embody these alternative values and demonstrate their message in the manner of their leadership. The use of power is subordinate to the goal of empowerment.<sup>56</sup> Placed in this context, the idea that leadership means power over others disappears and the tensions between leadership and servanthood evaporate.

It seems that Paul had little difficulty in reconciling leadership and service and that the meeting point was found in his role as father of the Christian families or households to which his preaching of the gospel had given birth. Here he uses a Jewish form of parental authority to govern the churches he has founded while also acting as their servant. So, although he could command and on occasions did (1 Cor. 7:10; 2 Thess. 3:4-6, 12 cf. Gal.), he would pre-

52 Bartchy, 'Undermining Ancient Patriarchy', 75-76. Theissen explicitly says, '...Paul's intention in no way (or at best only marginally) lay in regulating social conflicts' (*Social Setting*, 165).

53 Bartchy, 'Undermining Ancient Patriarchy', 76.

54 Kathy Ehrensperger, *Paul and the Dynamics of Power: Communication and Interaction in the Early Christ-Movement*, LNTS 325, (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 118-119.

55 Ehrensperger, *Paul and the Dynamics of Power*, 151-154.

56 Ehrensperger, *Paul and the Dynamics of Power*, 196-199.



fer to persuade and usually employs the language of advice or pleading (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:6, 25; 2 Cor. 5:20; 6:3-13; Eph. 4:1; Phil 4:2; Phlm. 8-9).

It also meant he was not above working manually (1 Thess. 2:9-12; 1 Cor. 9:1-18); undertaking voluntary and self-imposed disciplines (1 Cor. 9:24-27); and suffering many, humiliating hardships (2 Cor. 11:16-33) for the sake of his children. The self-sacrifice that he demonstrated in sharing his life with his spiritual children (1 Thess. 2:7-9)<sup>57</sup> was exactly what one would expect of any father or mother worthy of the name. From one angle, fathers are the leader of the family, but from another angle they are quintessentially servants.

## V Conclusion

The resolution of the tension between leadership and servanthood is found when we place the concepts back into the New Testament social world and understand the nature of being a father. Fathers were figures of authority and they gave direction to the families. Their conversion to Christianity meant that Jewish, Greek or Roman households adopted a Christian identity (cf. Acts 16:31-34). So, while

fathers were in charge they were, because of Christ, simultaneously the family's servant. The family looked to them not only for decisions and direction but also for support, maintenance, encouragement and practical service. For all their authority, most fathers would have known what it was to undertake menial tasks, without detriment to their position as a leader.

Fathers were not perfect and no doubt their personalities meant that one pole would have been more apparent than the other. Some would have permanently got the balance wrong and either been too severe or too servile in their role, causing damage to their families. All would have got the balance wrong on occasions. Yet, for the most part, although imperfect, the tension between leading and serving was happily resolved in creating an enjoyable and wholesome family life. In fact, the tension might not usually even have been noticed. Being a leader and being a servant happily co-existed in daily life. It was the way it was.

What was true of the ancient world remains evident in the contemporary western world, even though parental authority has been diminished and somewhat undermined by the power of the state. Good parents still lead the family, making the major decisions, determining its moral and spiritual framework, and, when necessary, exercising discipline. But much of the time parents are earning the money, doing the washing, cooking the meal, being the taxi-driver, listening to the uppity teenager, tidying the home, attending the sporting fixture or concert performance and paying the bills. For most, leadership and service coalesce in the role of the parent and the

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<sup>57</sup> The reference in 1 Thess. 2:7-9 is to 'a nursing mother' rather than the father. But Paul immediately changes his metaphor and writes of himself as a father who displayed the positive aspects of fatherhood, namely, dealing with them individually 'encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God'. For a discussion of the parental motif and the background to 1 Thess. 2:7-12, see Derek Tidball, *Builders and Fools: leadership the Bible way* (Leicester: IVP, 1999), 87-102.

context of the family very naturally without too much difficulty.

The New Testament suggests that this 'parental'<sup>58</sup> model is the model which should be adopted by servant-

leaders. It is there that the tensions of leader and servant are largely overcome. If we adopted this perspective, some of the personal *angst* experienced by those called to lead might be reduced and some of the distorted historical models might be assigned to the museum of yesteryear. We will have a healthier church, because we will have a healthier leadership, a leadership that leads but in the manner that Christ intended.

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**58** I hesitate to use the word 'parental' because it is often given a negative, preachy connotation. But I use the word in its best sense which combines the disciplinary and nurturing aspects of the role.

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