

# **STRESSING SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN A LAND OF BIG MEN AND GREAT MEN**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Of all the terms associated with Melanesian leadership types, it is the term “big man” which has achieved the greatest recognition, and which has been most readily equated with the Melanesian leadership style. Lindstrom (1981) traces the historical use, and acceptance, of the term, within anthropological circles, to a growing dissatisfaction with the term “chief”, which developed during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. “Chief” or, more specifically, the connotations associated with it, did not seem to fit within the Melanesian context. Melanesian leaders simply did not act in what was understood by Europeans to be a “chiefly” way.

Lindstrom records that, beginning in the 1930s, ethnographers began employing a host of terms to replace the “chief” misnomer. While some chose to simply use the vernacular (Hogbin, 1938; Oliver, 1955; Read, 1946), others (Williams, 1936; Berndt, 1969; BurrIDGE, 1969; Chowning and Goodenough, 1965; Salisbury, 1964) employed more descriptive terms, which characterised the Melanesian leadership model, from “headman”, “centreman”, and “strongman”, to “manager”, “magnate”, “director”, and “executive” (Lindstrom, p. 901).

While Sahlins was not the first to use the “big man” label, it was he, nonetheless, who truly popularised the term. Contrasting Melanesian and Polynesian leadership styles, his article, “Poor Man, Rich Man, Big Man, Chief” (1963), set forth the Melanesian “big man” as the prototypical leader of that region. According to Sahlins, “big man” status was achieved through “a series of acts, which elevate a person above the common herd, and attract about him a coterie of loyal, lesser men” (p. 289). It was Sahlins’s contention that these acts were largely economic in nature, and, further, that, while “big men” were concerned with the welfare of their respective groups as a whole, more basic to the “big man” ethos was “self-interested cunning and economic calculation” (p. 289).

Although “big man” emerged from the melee of leadership terms as the preferred label, within the Melanesian context, Sahlins’s methodology, as well as the label itself, has been subject to a large degree of criticism. Sahlins’s model has been critiqued as an oversimplification of Melanesian political forms (Allen, 1984, p. 20; Roscoe, 2000, p. 85). Most notably, his contention that “little or no authority is given by social ascription” (p. 290) has repeatedly been proven wrong (Stagl, 1971; Baker, 1983; Mansoben and Walker, 1990; Mosko, 1992, p. 714, Scaglione, 1996). In all fairness, Sahlins was forthright about the preliminary nature of his model (p. 285, note). He was also well aware that hereditary leadership did, in fact, exist in Melanesia (Liep, 1991, p. 28). His error was in viewing these as exceptions to the “big man” rule, rather than as equally-valid leadership types for Melanesia. In fact, Godelier (1986, p. 188) has stressed that it is Sahlins’s “big man” that is the true exception in the Melanesian context.

Sahlins’s focus on economic manipulation, as central to the “big man” model, has also been criticised. Lindstrom (1984, 291-292) has argued that manipulation of knowledge is an equally-valid basis of “big man” status. Chowning (1979, p. 74), Rubel and Rosman (1978, p. 292), and Harrison (1982, p. 145) concur. In addition, Gell (1975, p. 25) points out that, for the Umeda, exchange of knowledge was

seen as more important than exchange of material goods. This completely contradicts the position of Sahlins, and shows that “big man” status does not, in every case, hinge on economic factors.

A further criticism of Sahlins’s model rests with the “big man” label itself. Just as “chief” became associated with certain connotations that did not fit the Melanesian context, so, too, did “big man” become inseparably linked with a certain stereotype of Melanesian leadership, namely Sahlins’s bourgeois, free-enterprising individual, whose “every public action is designed to make a competitive and invidious comparison with others” (p. 289). Liep (p. 29) has commented that, in many Melanesian societies, such a man simply did not exist. Godelier (1986), in response, introduced the “great man” label to depict a class of leaders, who possessed great fighting, hunting, and gardening skills, or a large measure of ritual knowledge, but who failed, as in the “big man” model, to turn those skills toward “massive economic production and exchange” (Roscoe, p. 94).

Sahlins’s explanation of Melanesian leadership continues to be critiqued today. But, while his “big man” model has been found wanting in many ways, it is, nevertheless, true that “Poor Man, Rich Man, Big-Man, Chief” has played a significant role in stimulating further research and study in the area of Melanesian leadership. Throughout, what has become increasingly clear is that the Melanesian context presents a variety of leadership types, with no single model characterising Melanesia as a whole. There is no easy definition of Melanesian leadership.

This being the case, how should the church consider leadership, in the Melanesian context? Are there characteristics or traits of Melanesian leadership that directly apply to leadership, in the biblical sense? What are the cultural influences that relate to leadership, of which the church needs to be aware? And how, in particular, does the biblical model of servant leadership apply within the Melanesian context? It is the intent of this paper to explore these issues, and to help facilitate

more discussion, not simply of Melanesian leadership, but of biblical leadership, in the Melanesian context.

### **SOME KEY QUALITIES OF THE MELANESIAN LEADER**

As already discussed, it is readily accepted that there is no single model of Melanesian leadership. It should also be apparent, then, that no qualities of Melanesian leadership can be said to apply, in all Melanesian contexts. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine all the various qualities, which relate to Melanesian leadership. This being understood, we will here examine three aspects of leadership that appear to be common to the various Melanesian models, and which have direct bearing on church leadership: power, provision, and reciprocity.

#### **KNOWLEDGE AS POWER**

Godelier has defined “great men” leaders as those who possess great fighting, hunting, or gardening skills, or a special knowledge of ritual. “Big men”, who are most typically known for their prowess and cunning in economic transactions, have also been shown to be the possessors of specialised knowledge (Burrige, 1975, pp. 95-96). In the Melanesian context, whether one speaks of skills, or of knowledge, *per se*, one is really speaking of the same thing, for skills stem from knowledge. To be skilful in a particular field necessitates knowledge of that field (i.e., to be a skilful gardener implies that one possesses a certain knowledge of what it is that makes a garden grow). Knowledge, then, is an essential aspect of Melanesian leadership.

#### **MAINTENANCE OF POWER**

If knowledge is seen as one of the bases of leadership, then knowledge necessarily equates with power. But power, based on knowledge, is fleeting, if the possessor of that knowledge is not careful in its distribution. As Lindstrom points out, “If a man gives away the totality of what he knows, all at once, spending its potential, he equalises the distribution of knowledge” (p. 301). As power structures are built on the basis of some inequality (in this case an inequality in what is known), to distribute one’s knowledge in its entirety, so that

all possess that knowledge equally, is to deprive oneself of the power formerly held, and by implication, of one's position of leadership. As such, the distribution of knowledge is something that must be closely controlled, "not at the point of generation, but rather at the point of its social consumption" (Lindstrom, p. 300). In the Melanesian context, it is, therefore, common for leaders to purposefully hold back knowledge, or to hold certain knowledge in secret. While certain knowledge is common to all Melanesians, there are types of knowledge, which are seen to belong to the realm of leaders alone, and which, in fact, constitute that leader's power and authority. To hold back that knowledge, or to maintain it as one's personal possession, thus becomes the means of maintaining one's leadership role, and controlling influence within the society.

### **THE BIBLICAL MODEL OF BESTOWING POWER**

Knowledge is just as important to a biblical definition of leadership as it is to a Melanesian definition. Although there are different types of leadership, when considered from a biblical perspective, if one focuses on the requirement for overseers – that they be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2), or that they hold fast the faithful word, which is in accordance with the teaching, so that they will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine, and to refute those who contradict (Tit 1:9) – then knowledge is clearly seen to be an essential part of biblical leadership.

In the Melanesian context, it is a given that church leaders are seen to possess a certain degree of power. Among other factors, this perception is undoubtedly related to the view that church leaders possess a greater level of knowledge than those in the congregation. As already noted, church leaders are, indeed, called upon to be possessors of knowledge. But more importantly, for the sake of the body, church leaders are called upon to be imparters of knowledge. Leaders are not to hoard knowledge, or to hold it in secret. Rather, they are to impart it to others, who will also take that knowledge, and continue to pass it on (2 Tim 2:2).

To be sure, knowledge is a means of power for the Christian. But, it must be emphasised, that knowledge, from a biblical perspective, must always be rooted in the Word of God. Not simply any knowledge, or any word, is to be imparted, but that Word, which has both the power to save (1 Cor 1:18), and the power for every good work (2 Tim 3:17). If the body of believers is to grow up in all aspects to be like Christ (Eph 4:15), then knowledge of Christ and his Word are essential, not simply for church leaders, but also for the “common” Christian. It is, therefore, indispensable that church leaders share the entirety of their knowledge of the Word of God with the congregation. This must always be borne in mind, and put into practice.

### **SUMMARY**

Knowledge is essential to both Melanesian and biblical models of leadership. It is also evident that knowledge is inseparably linked to power. But while power, which stems from knowledge, remains the possession of the select few, in the Melanesian context, from a biblical perspective, that power needs to be extended to all. It takes a secure leader to relinquish a position of power to others. John’s statement “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30) is very much the attitude that must be maintained. Church leaders must understand that, in a very real way, the imparting of knowledge to others lessens the power one holds over others. But this is at the heart of what it means to serve as a leader in the church. More will be said on this later.

### **MELANESIAN LEADERS AS PROVIDERS**

Basic to Sahlins’s model of leadership, was the idea that Melanesian “big men” were largely interested in the promotion of self, and that interest in general welfare was ostensible at best (p. 289). Meggitt (1973, p. 193) took exception to this proposal, arguing that, as “big men” gained more and more status, an increasing measure of wealth would flow back to his followers. In this manner, while “big men” might demonstrate a large degree of self-interest, at the same time, they were seen to provide for the community, as a whole.

In this respect, Godelier's model of the "great man" is similar to Meggitt's. Because Melanesian societies are collectivist in nature, any skill, which benefits the "great man" leader, also benefits the group as a whole. Hunting, fighting, and gardening skills not only lend prestige to the individual, who possesses these traits, but also provide for the general welfare of the community. When a leader's garden has an abundant harvest, its surplus is shared within the clan, or within the larger community. In like manner, the spoils of a successful hunt are not consumed by the individual hunter, but are divided up among the larger group. In addition, an individual, who possesses specialised ritual knowledge, can use that knowledge to direct the actions of the larger group, so that all will benefit. Countless examples could be cited here. Truly, within the Melanesian context, when the individual prospers, the group prospers as well.

### **SELF-INTEREST, GROUP-INTEREST, OR BOTH?**

Undoubtedly, Melanesian leadership models are characterised by both self-interest and group-interest. But it can be asked, do both simply coincide, or can one be viewed as the primary motivation for exercising leadership, with the other playing only a marginal role? As noted, it was Sahlins's contention that "big man" leaders were motivated by self-interest. Others (Fugmann, 1984; Mantovani, 1984; Whiteman, 1984) have stressed that life, or what, in Melanesia, may properly be termed "salvation", can only be found within the context of community. According to this model, the group's welfare, and not that of the individual, must be seen as the primary motivation for all acts, whether they be acts of leadership, or otherwise.

While it is possible to find arguments for both sides, it is important to remember that, historically, Melanesian culture is rooted in animism, a belief system that is characterised by a desire to control and manipulate (Van Rheezen, 1991, pp. 21-22). And while it is true that the animist primarily seeks to control and manipulate the spirit world, there is, at the same time, a certain measure of manipulation and self-interest that enters into all animistic relationships. Self-preservation is a strong motivating factor, and, inasmuch as the group benefits from

these self-preserving acts, so much the better. Leadership, in the Melanesian context, must always be considered in this light. Power, prestige, and influence are not typically selfless pursuits.

### **PASTORAL PROVIDER**

It is not for this paper to determine whether leadership in Melanesia is primarily characterised by self-interest or group-interest. The discussion thus far highlights, however, that there is a self-serving interest, common to at least some types of Melanesian leadership. The church must, therefore, consider this aspect of Melanesian leadership, and address the issues that arise from it.

Now, it can be argued that there is a self-serving interest, which is freely evident in all people, whether the context is Melanesia, or any other place. How then can church leaders escape this measure of self-interest? How can pastors and other church leaders serve within the church?

To answer this, the church must look to Christ as the prototypical leader, who provides for His people. The shepherd metaphor has much to teach us here. Christ said, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Apart from providing for His people on a day-by-day basis, Christ has provided for their ultimate salvation, by laying down His life for them. In this sacrificial act, there was no measure of self-interest. Here, the welfare of the group, alone, was in mind.

All Christians are admonished to exercise the same humility and self-disinterest that was exhibited by Christ (Phil 2:5-8). This is doubly so for those who lead within the church. Leadership cannot be viewed as a means of power, control, and prestige, but, rather, should be seen as a position of emptying of self, and providing fully for others. It is not enough to say that self-interest and group-interest can happily coincide in church leadership. As much as humanly possible, and then with God's help, pastors and other church leaders must divorce themselves from all self-serving interests, and see their role as one of providing



for others, and not for self. The welfare of the group or congregation must always be in mind. Christ's example shows the proper model of leadership for the church.

## **SUMMARY**

In the collectivist societies of Melanesia, group welfare is a dominant theme. It would be a mistake to think, however, that self-serving interests are absent, in the Melanesian context. Sahlins saw self-interest as one of the primary motivating factors for "big man" leaders. It is essential that the church address leadership issues, with this in mind. Questions of motivation and intent should be freely discussed, with an understanding of how cultural models of leadership affect one's view of biblical leadership. The Melanesian concern for welfare of the group should be built upon, and Christ's selfless example should be reiterated, time and again.

## **RECIPROCITY AND OBLIGATION IN RELATIONSHIPS**

One of the most predominant traits of Melanesian cultures is the principle of reciprocity. Within the Melanesian context, a basic worldview assumption states that true relationships must be expressed in mutual giving and receiving. As these relationships play out, the welfare of the individual, as well as the group, is provided for.

No theory of reciprocity can be considered, apart from the role of obligation. Narokobi (1988, p. 34) has commented that obligation is central to all Melanesian life. It is also central to the principle of reciprocity. To engage in relationship means that certain obligations exist: the obligation to return a favour, when one has been received; or the expectation of future benefit, when a favour has been bestowed. To live as part of Melanesian society, means to exist as one who is always under obligation, and who places others under obligation. Without this central focus on obligation, reciprocal relationships could not exist.

## **USING OBLIGATIONS TO ONE'S OWN ADVANTAGE**

While one of the main concerns of reciprocal relationships is to maintain a state of equality within the society (MacDonald, 1984, p. 216), it is also true that one can use the obligatory nature of those relationships to one's own advantage. Going back to the "big man" system of leadership, Sahlins (p. 292) states that "big men" sustain their status, through calculated generosity. By giving a gift, or bestowing a favour in some way, the "big man" places others under obligation, which he can then turn to his advantage at some future point in time. Quoting Malinowski, Sahlins refers to this as "amassing a 'fund of power' " (p. 292).

Any reciprocal relationship can be used to further one's own ends. By giving in some form today, one can store up benefits, and make provision for one's own future well-being and security. This manipulation of relationship does not exist in the realm of leadership alone. But, when present among leaders, one must once again ask, "What is the primary motivation in leadership, when providing for others?" Is it the welfare of the group, or is it self-interest? Reciprocity can, indeed, ensure a measure of equality within the society, but only when members are, more or less, viewed as equals to begin with. Without this fundamental understanding, reciprocity and obligation can very quickly turn to self-interested manipulation.

## **A BODY COMPOSED OF MANY PARTS**

The New Testament depicts the church as a body of believers, composed of many parts (1 Cor 12:12-26). And while Paul apparently presents a hierarchy of offices (v. 28), the overwhelming emphasis of the body metaphor is that all parts are necessary to the proper functioning of the church, and no single member is to disdain another, or to consider himself/herself as more important than any other member. There is true equality within the body. Christ Himself is the head (Eph 4:15), and all are under Him.

Church leaders must constantly bear the body metaphor in mind. To be sure, church leaders do possess a measure of God-given authority.

But there is no room for the use of power as an instrument of manipulation. Where reciprocity produces mutual relationships of help, trust, and respect, then obligation serves a noble end. Where reciprocity is used to harness another's productivity, or where it is used as a tool to advance one's own position, then obligation is being used in a manipulatory way that directly contradicts the message of the body metaphor.

It is common for church leaders to believe that the congregation owes them some measure of respect, as well as certain perceived rights and privileges that go along with a particular office. It is the leader's due, or what is owed to him. But Rom 13:8 should be well remembered: owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another. The congregation owes its leaders love. In fact, it could be said that they are under obligation to love their leaders. To press obligation any further than this, however, would be to use culture in a way that is not supported by scripture.

### **SUMMARY**

In the Melanesian context, reciprocity is both the expectation and the norm in all true relationships. When reciprocity is used to maintain a measure of equality within the society, or when it ensures that the society, as a whole, is provided for, it serves a dignified end. It is also true, however, that reciprocity can very quickly turn to meet self-serving ends.

The church, and church leaders, in particular, must remember that, within the body, there is equality under Christ. Leadership, therefore, cannot be used as a means of harnessing the church's productivity, as in the "big man" model. More appropriate would be a harnessing of the leader's productivity, for the benefit of the church.

### **SERVANT LEADERSHIP**

While it can be argued that, nowhere in the pages of scripture, do the words "servant" and "leadership" stand side by side, so clear is the biblical depiction of leadership that the servant leader ideal cannot be

denied. The scriptures make it clear that all Christians first serve the Lord (Col 3:24). Then there is service directed toward one another (Gal 5:13). It can also be argued that Christians serve the world at large, in the sense that they are to be salt and light (Matt 5:13-16) in the world, living lives that are characterised by good works, which bring glory to God.

Perhaps the best text, which relates to servant leadership, is Matt 20:25-28. There, Jesus calls upon His disciples to lead, not as the Gentile rulers, who lord it over their minions, but as humble servants. From a biblical perspective, those, who would be great, demonstrate their greatness, not in their ability to rule others, but in their ability to serve others. Christ, Himself, is the supreme example of the one who shows greatness, through a humble servant attitude.

In a land, where leaders are known as “big men” and “great men”, the idea of humbling oneself in the service of others is certainly a difficult concept to grasp. Without a doubt, many have made the transition to a biblically-based model of leadership, and have served their churches well. But, as the influence of culture is so all pervasive, it would not be a surprise if many church leaders incorporated the “big man” and “great man” philosophies of leadership into their church leadership positions. Can leadership, in the Melanesian context, be understood in any other way?

Certainly, there are many redeeming qualities found within the Melanesian style of leadership. And these qualities, rightly so, can and should be incorporated into a Melanesian model of biblical leadership. The church, however, must always remember that biblical leadership is about service. Even in the Melanesian context, service must be the primary motivation for leaders in the church.

## **CONCLUSION**

Clearly there is no one model of leadership to be found within the Melanesian context. Melanesian leadership models differ. This article, however, has sought to address a number of the more common

themes that run throughout the various models. We have considered here power, provision, and reciprocity, because each of these has a direct bearing on the biblical model of leadership. Each aspect, we have considered can, in certain ways, be used successfully by the church's leaders. We have seen, though, that it takes only a very small step to use each in a self-serving manner.

While it would be both unfair, and an overgeneralisation, to say that Melanesian leadership styles tend toward self-serving, it can be said, conclusively, that the biblical model of leadership is selfless, and has serving at its core. Church leaders in Melanesia, as well as in any other context, are called upon to humbly serve the Lord, the church, and the community at large. As such, it is the church's responsibility to raise up and train such men and women as will be able to accomplish this task. It is hoped that some of the issues addressed here will aid the church in that endeavour.

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