

# **Servant-Leadership: Whom Do We Serve?**

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A small boy once went to a well. In that well, he found a coin. Uncertain what to do with this coin, he put it in his pocket and ran home. The next day, he found himself drawn back to the well. Once more he found a coin. He added that coin to his pocket and ran home once more. After 5 days returning to the well each morning, the boy was feeling quite proud of himself for his newfound wealth, but wondered from whence the money came. So, he hid himself in the weeds to wait. Later that day, a man came to the well, wished for wealth, and threw a coin in the well. The boy grew excited and decided to help the man. He wrote on a sheet of paper, “if you desire wealth, stop throwing your money away,” took all the coins he had found in the well, and placed them with the sheet of paper on the edge of the well for the man to find. That boy never found another coin in the well.

This story illustrates a tension between self-denial and self-affirmation. The boy denied himself the money and seemingly didn't take his own advice. The man daily affirmed his desire while denying the method to achieve it. As we look to the cross, we find this same tension, especially as we consider its implications for leadership. Stott (1986) says, “Because our new self, though redeemed, is still fallen, a double attitude will be necessary, namely self-denial and self-affirmation, both illumined by the cross” (p. 271). When applied to Christ, we see both explored within scripture. In theological terms, “the so-called *kenotic* (empty) emphasis in the scriptures [describes] the earthly ministry of Jesus ... primarily in terms of his surrender of the prerogatives of deity” (Niewold, 2007, p. 121). Alternately, the “*pleromatic* (full) emphasis ... accentuates the constant deity and progressive glorification of Christ as man” (Niewold, 2007, p. 121). We will consider these emphases in the context of two passages of scripture in light of servant-leadership. We will look to Philippians 2 to explore the *kenotic* emphasis. We will look to Colossians 2 to explore the *pleromatic* emphasis.

## Kenotic Emphasis

Philippians 2:4-8 is an interesting passage to consider as we think about servant leadership. It says, “Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” There are many implications within this passage:

1. Every man is told to “look also on the things of others.” The implication is one of equality between man and man. We are not to just consider our own things, but also those of others.
2. Just as man is equal with man, Jesus is equal with God. But equality of personhood and role have different implications. Jesus, though equal with God, took the role of a servant and became man. But whose servant did he become?
3. The rest of the passage helps us understand Jesus as a servant. It says, “he humbled himself, and became **obedient** unto death, even death of the cross.” While many could interpret Jesus’ service as to us through his substitutionary death, this passage (through its use of the word obedient) seems to imply that Jesus’ service was primarily to God. As such, we may need to reconsider our views of servant-leadership. John seems to support this view as he quotes Jesus saying, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise” (John 5:19), and “I can of mine own self do nothing:

as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me” (John 5:30).

If we now understand Jesus’ role as a servant-leader as to God, then our own approach to servant-leadership may need modification. Leadership at all levels implies power. Os Guinness (2000) says, “Power—the ability to carry out one’s will despite resistance—has always been essential to leadership. But traditionally, power has been held in harmony with two other components: purpose and partnership” (p. 19). While a servant-leader would like any other leader have access to power, the implication is that he would wield it differently, or perhaps not at all. Through the lenses of power, purpose and partnership, we will consider how our minds need to be renewed as we look to servant-leadership.

Jesus was all powerful, but laid his power aside for a purpose (his substitutionary death) in partnership and service to God. Therefore, in order to follow after Christ’s example within servant-leadership, we would need to not use our power for a purpose in partnership and service to Christ, whom we now serve as Christians. Note that we are not told to give up whatever power we are given. Christ still held all of the power, he just didn’t use it. Likewise, we still can hold positions of leadership and wield power. We are just not to use it according to our own will. Corne Bekker (2005) found an example of this type of sacrifice in Clare of Assisi: “Clare’s voluntary divesting of power, prestige and possessions find its theological context in her deep desire to follow in the footsteps of the kenotic Christ who emptied Himself and embraced poverty for the sake of others” (p. 2).

### **Pleromatic Emphasis**

Colossians 2:8-15 tells of the other necessary side to consider as we think about servant-leadership. It says, “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the

tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power: In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with [him] through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; [And] having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it.” This passage has slightly different implications:

1. We are told that in Christ “dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.” Similar to the passage in Philippians, we see Christ as fully God, but also see that he did, in fact, retain his power in human form.
2. We are described as “complete in him” because we have been “buried with him in baptism, wherein ye are risen with [him].” This passage identifies Christ as our “representative,” whereby “he did what we by being united to him have also done: we have died and risen with him” (Stott, 1986, p. 269).
3. This passage makes clear that we are now identified with Christ and given a present glory because Christ has triumphed over principalities and powers. However, present glory has requirements placed upon it. It is by no means an open-ended freedom.

This new passage offers us additional details into Jesus’ role as a servant-leader. First, by combining the passages we’ve seen in Philippians and Colossians, we are able to see the meekness of Christ. I don’t want us to misunderstand meekness, however. Winston (2002) says,

“The Greek term is a rich term and more fully translated into ‘controlled discipline’” (p. 41). In this view, we can understand Christ’s power as fully his, but under control as directed by the Father. Therefore, we can also see the expectation on us as followers of Christ: we are to use our power in a controlled manner, as directed by Christ. Therefore, returning to Guinness’s (2000) combination of power, purpose, and partnership, we see Christ’s purpose as partnership with God to offer us power we by no means deserve—the power of the gospel.

Jesus’ power was made perfect through sacrifice, for in his sacrifice he defeated the principalities and powers of the world and triumphed over them. Likewise, we must choose between selfish ambition and sacrifice in our own roles as leaders.

Jesus’ purpose was to complete the will of the Father. Therefore, when we are in leadership, we have to choose whether or not to bridle our power. Stott (1986) describes it this way, “Leadership and lordship are two distinct concepts. The symbol of an authentically Christian leadership is not the purple robe of an emperor but the coarse apron of a slave; not a throne of ivory and gold but a basin of water for the washing of feet” (p. 280). Again, this is all true in light of service to Christ. We are not in bondage to the world or its people, but to Christ.

Jesus’ partnership with the Father required suffering over comfort for both Father and Son in order to accomplish God’s greatest work. We, too, are asked to choose between suffering and comfort if we expect to follow Christ’s leadership.

### **Practical Application**

Our service to others is not open-ended, but specific to our purpose. Stott (1986) says, “Sometimes God calls us to deny to ourselves things which, though not wrong in themselves or attributable to the Fall, yet stand in the way of our doing his particular will for us. This is why Jesus, whose humanity was perfect and not fallen, still had to deny himself” (p. 277). Our actions

as leaders will require us to deny ourselves things to which our office entitles us. Are you willing to forgo comfort to follow God's will for your life?

Service to man is only an outgrowth of service to Christ. Christ affirmed man in three ways (Stott, 1986, p. 274). First, Jesus spoke of the "value of human beings in God's sight. (Mt 6:26; 12:12). Second, Jesus attitude to people was such that "he went out of his way to honor those whom the world dishonored and to accept those whom the world rejected." Third, Jesus' mission and death was expressed well by William Temple (1941), "My worth is what I am worth to God; and this is a marvelous great deal, for Christ died for me" (p. 74). Do you view individuals as God views them—with value, honor, and sacrifice—even when the world does not?

Service to Christ requires that we seek not our own will (John 5:30). In fact, Stott offers three deaths and resurrections illustrated by Paul in his letters. There is a legal, moral, and physical death. Legally, we are now owned by Christ. Morally, we cannot continue in our sin and remain Christ's servants. Physically, we must recognize Christ's strength in our own weakness (1 Cr 9:27). Are you joining with Christ in his sufferings—legally, morally, and physically?

### **Conclusions**

We have considered the tension between the *kenotic* and *pleromatic* emphases of Christ's life and found them to be complementary within the view of servant-leadership. Both have allowed us to see Christ as equal with God, Christ's service as primarily to God, and our resulting actions as necessarily in obedience to Christ and his example. Using Guinness's combination of power, purpose, and partnership, we found Christ made perfect through weakness and found ourselves joined with Christ. Christ gave us an example of sacrifice, service, and suffering.

As Christians, we live between the “already” and the “not yet.” While we are presently joined with Christ, we are not yet glorified. Therefore, our lives must mirror that of Christ. We must sacrifice our lives to God and live according to his direction, regardless of our comfort. We must serve individuals with value, honor and sacrifice that the world shuns. And we must daily join with Christ in his sufferings: keeping the sight of the cross in clear focus.

Stott says it well, “In theory we know very well the paradoxical principle that suffering is the path to glory, death the way to life, and weakness the secret of power. It was for Jesus, and it still is for his followers today.” To join with Christ will in fact improve our minds and bodies, because they will be brought into subjection to Him. And He provides all we will ever need.



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