**Approaching Leadership Studies Priority 2: Exposing Alternative Models Assignment**

Sarah Kimball Grunblatt, ThM, MPH, MS, MS, MEd, MEd, MA, BS

School of Divinity, Liberty University

Biblical & Theological Foundations of Leadership: CLED-700

Dr. Alvin Dockett

August 10, 2025

**Author Note**

Sarah Kimball Grunblatt, ThM, MPH, MS, MS, MEd, MEd, MA, BS

I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Sarah Kimball Grunblatt.

Email: [SKGrunblatt@liberty.edu](mailto:SKGrunblatt@liberty.edu)

CONTENTS

[Introduction 3](#_Toc204404655)

[Part 1: Brief Summary of the Article 3](#_Toc204404656)

[Part 2: Interaction and Critique of Author’s Main Thesis/Argument 4](#_Toc204404657)

[2.1 Assumptions and Worldview of the Author 5](#_Toc204404658)

[2.2 Alignments with Christian Leadership 6](#_Toc204404659)

[2.3 Misalignments and Critiques 6](#_Toc204404660)

[2.4 Reinterpretation from a Christian Perspective 8](#_Toc204404661)

[Conclusion 10](#_Toc204404662)

[References 11](#_Toc204404663)

# **Introduction**

In the exploration of leadership studies from a Christian perspective, this paper exposes and critiques an alternative model of leadership. This analysis—which draws on biblical truths about God's sovereign and triune nature, humanity's creation in the imago Dei yet fallen state, and Christian leadership as Christ-centered servanthood—examines Robert Greenleaf's seminal essay, "The Servant as Leader." Greenleaf's model, while superficially resonant with biblical themes of service, is rooted in secular assumptions that diverge from a scriptural worldview. This critique will summarize the essay, interact with its main thesis, and expose its underlying foundations, drawing on academic sources to highlight alignments and misalignments with Christian leadership principles.

# **Part 1: Brief Summary of the Article**

Robert Greenleaf's (1970) essay, "The Servant as Leader," introduces a paradigm where leadership emerges from a primary orientation toward service. The idea originated from Greenleaf's reading of Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East*, in which a servant named Leo sustains a group on a journey, only to be revealed as the true leader whose absence causes chaos. This narrative inspired Greenleaf to propose that great leaders are first seen as servants, with leadership bestowed upon those naturally inclined to serve.

The main thesis posits that society faces a leadership crisis resolvable only if more "natural servants" assume leadership roles or if people refuse to follow non-servant leaders. The servant-leader is defined as one who serves first, driven by an innate desire to meet others' highest-priority needs, rather than seeking power or possessions. The ultimate test of this leadership is whether those served grow as individuals—becoming healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely to become servants themselves—while ensuring no harm to the least privileged in society (Greenleaf, 1970).

Greenleaf (1970) outlines key characteristics of servant-leaders, including listening intently to identify group will, accepting and empathizing with people without rejection, and using persuasion over coercion, as exemplified by Quaker abolitionist John Woolman. Other traits include foresight (intuitive insight into future outcomes), awareness (heightened perception for better decision-making), conceptualization (dreaming great dreams to inspire), healing (seeking wholeness for self and others), and building community (fostering small, face-to-face groups for genuine care). He emphasizes that leadership involves risk, initiative, and working with human imperfection, assuming that societal progress depends on individuals stepping forward as servants.

Throughout, Greenleaf (1970) draws on examples from literature, history, and personal experience, such as Danish educator Nikolai Grundtvig's Folk High Schools, to illustrate how servant-leadership transforms institutions like universities, businesses, and churches. He critiques coercive, hierarchical models and advocates for a dynamic, intuitive approach where leaders view problems as internal ("in here") rather than external, promoting personal growth and communal wholeness.

# **Part 2: Interaction and Critique of Author’s Main Thesis/Argument**

Greenleaf's (1970) central thesis—that the servant-leader is servant first, with leadership as a conscious choice stemming from a natural desire to serve—presents an alternative model that warrants exposure from a Christian viewpoint. While elements align superficially with biblical teachings, such as Jesus' command to serve—“But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45)[[1]](#footnote-1)—the model's foundations reveal a secular, humanistic worldview that diverges significantly from the framework of Christian leadership. This critique exposes Greenleaf's assumptions, evaluates alignments and misalignments, and draws on academic sources to debunk aspects incompatible with a scriptural theology.

# **2.1 Assumptions and Worldview of the Author**

At its core, Greenleaf's (1970) argument assumes an optimistic view of human nature, positing that individuals possess innate potential for growth, intuition, and heroism if led wisely. He views humans as a mix of good and evil but emphasizes their capacity for dedication and wholeness through service, without acknowledging the doctrine of total depravity or original sin central to biblical anthropology: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Humanity is defined biblically as created in God's image yet fallen, requiring redemption through Christ for true transformation. Greenleaf's model, by contrast, relies on self-motivated service and intuitive insight, implying that leadership emerges from human effort alone, not divine empowerment. This humanistic foundation, inspired by Hesse's mystical narrative rather than Scripture, reflects a worldview where problems are resolved internally through personal initiative, sidelining God's sovereignty and the Holy Spirit's role in gifting leaders: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone... All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills” (1 Corinthians 12:4-6, 11).

# **2.2 Alignments with Christian Leadership**

One alignment with Christian leadership is the emphasis on service and follower growth. Greenleaf's (1970) "best test"—measuring leadership by whether followers become healthier, wiser, and more servant-like—echoes Jesus' model of servanthood, where He washed the disciples' feet and instructed, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15), and taught that greatness comes through serving others: “It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26-28). Academic analyses affirm this overlap; for instance, servant leadership is seen as principally biblical when aligned with virtues like humility—“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3)—as it promotes distributed leadership and mutual submission mirroring the Trinity (Patterson, 2016). Similarly, Christ's teachings provide a foundation for servant-leadership traits like empathy and commitment to growth, which Greenleaf secularizes but which originate in biblical examples of leaders like Moses, David, and Paul, who served despite personal cost (Locke & Smith, 2021).

# **2.3 Misalignments and Critiques**

However, significant misalignments arise in the model's roots and application. Greenleaf's (1970) thesis is not biblically derived; it stems from eastern mysticism via Hesse and treats religious texts as mere human stories, not authoritative revelation (Locke & Smith, 2021). Critiques highlight that while Greenleaf's approach may yield practical benefits like employee engagement, it lacks Christian theology's emphasis on service as obedience to God, not just others. For example, power in Greenleaf's model comes from followers granting authority based on trustworthiness, whereas in biblical leadership, authority derives from God—“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Romans 13:1)—with Christ as the ultimate source, not subordinate needs. (Locke & Smith, 2021). Moreover, Greenleaf's persuasion over coercion ignores Jesus' occasional autocratic style, such as rebuking Peter—“Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (Mark 8:33)—or sending disciples with strict instructions: “These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them, ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’” (Matthew 10:5-6), prioritizing mission over participative input (Patterson, 2016).

Exposing the worldview, Greenleaf's (1970) assumptions promote a relativistic ethic where intuition and foresight bridge rational gaps, without reference to divine wisdom or prayer. This contrasts with the view of God as the triune leader who models sacrificial service—“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8)—and humanity's need for redemption to lead rightly (Johnson, 2020). Academic sources debunk this by noting servant leadership's potential failure when follower values misalign, as in Jesus' interaction with the rich young ruler, where even perfect servant traits did not yield transformation due to lacking readiness: “And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, ‘You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’ Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Mark 10:21-22)—a reminder that true change requires spiritual alignment, not just humanistic service (Mizzell & Huizing, 2020). Critics argue Greenleaf's model risks utopian idealism, incompatible with profit-driven contexts or the biblical call to serve God first—“For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10)—potentially diluting the Gospel by making servanthood an end rather than a means to glorify Christ (Locke & Smith, 2021).

# **2.4 Reinterpretation from a Christian Perspective**

In reinterpretation, Greenleaf's (1970) focus on community, healing, listening, and empathy offers valuable elements that can be redeemed and integrated into a Christ-centered framework, but *only* when subordinated to biblical principles *and* the redemptive work of Christ in the soul of the individual. For instance, Greenleaf's emphasis on building community through small, caring groups can be reinterpreted through the lens of the early church in Acts 2:42-47, where believers devoted themselves to fellowship, breaking bread, and sharing possessions, resulting in communal wholeness grounded in the apostles' teaching and prayer: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... And all who believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:42, 44). This biblical community is not merely humanistic but empowered by the Holy Spirit, fostering unity that reflects the Trinity and advances God's kingdom (Ephesians 4:1-6).

Similarly, traits like foresight and conceptualization—Greenleaf's call to "dream great dreams"—can be adapted by anchoring them in prophetic vision and divine calling, as seen in leaders like Nehemiah, who rebuilt Jerusalem's walls through God-inspired initiative despite opposition (Nehemiah 2:17-18). However, Christian reinterpretation insists that such intuition *must* derive from prayerful discernment *and* Scripture, *not* innate human potential, to avoid the pitfalls of self-reliance. Academic discussions support this adaptation; for example, servant leadership can serve biblical themes when its precepts—such as putting service before self-interest and inspiring trust—are explicitly tied to Jesus' example, transforming Greenleaf's secular model into a tool for missional living (Hejazi, 2011). Furthermore, healing in Greenleaf's model, aimed at wholeness, finds deeper meaning in Christ's restorative ministry, where physical and spiritual healing point to eternal redemption (James 5:14-15), requiring leaders to address sin's root causes through the Gospel.

Ultimately, reinterpreting Greenleaf requires infusing his ideas with the doctrine of atonement and dependence on God. Service becomes not a natural inclination but a response to Christ's sacrificial love: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:23-24). This shifts the focus from societal progress through human servants to kingdom advancement through redeemed sinners empowered by grace. As one scholar notes, while Greenleaf's theory is not inherently Christian, it can be reimagined as "Jesus-like" servant leadership when centered on devotion to Christ's mission, calling leaders to serve the church's wider purpose rather than individual growth alone (Holloman, 2023). His secular roots thus expose a worldview that elevates human potential over divine dependence, assuming societal change through individual servants without acknowledging sin's pervasive impact or the need for atonement, but careful reinterpretation allows Christians to glean practical insights while upholding scriptural authority.

# **Conclusion**

Greenleaf's (1970) "The Servant as Leader" offers a compelling alternative model emphasizing service, growth, and community, yet its secular foundations—rooted in humanistic literature and an optimistic anthropology rather than Scripture—fundamentally diverge from the biblical priorities of Christian leadership, which demand recognition of human sinfulness, divine sovereignty, and Christocentric servanthood. By exposing and critiquing these assumptions, including the reliance on intuition over revelation and self-motivated service over Spirit-empowered obedience, this analysis reveals the model's limitations in addressing the full scope of leadership within a fallen world. Nevertheless, through reinterpretation, elements of Greenleaf's framework can be redeemed to enhance Christian practice, provided they are realigned with the Gospel's transformative power and the ultimate goal of glorifying God. This underscores the necessity for Christian leaders to discern secular theories through the lens of Scripture, ensuring that all leadership models serve to advance God's redemptive plan rather than human ideals alone. In doing so, believers can engage alternative perspectives critically, extracting wisdom while remaining anchored in eternal truth.

# **References**

*English Standard Version Bible*. (2016). Crossway Bibles. (Original work published 2001)

Greenleaf, R. K. (1970). *The servant as leader*. Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership. <http://www.ediguys.net/Robert_K_Greenleaf_The_Servant_as_Leader.pdf>

Hejazi, C. (2011). *How servant leadership theory serves a biblical theme*. <https://www.regent.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/MoralLeadConf2011_Hejazi_Charity.pdf>

Holloman, C. (2023). *Leading the church by serving the mission: Reimagining servant leadership for clergy* [Doctoral dissertation, Duke University]. DukeSpace. <https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/items/96c03c52-8e32-4a49-bd5a-3e7f190f971e>

Johnson, J. P. (2020). *Servant leadership as the biblical model* [Master's thesis, Reformed Theological Seminary]. RTS Digital Collections. <https://cdn.rts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Johnson_Jeff_Thesis_20200309.pdf>

Mizzell, N., & Huizing, R. L. (2020). When servant leadership fails: The importance of aligning values. *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership*, 8(1), 1-14. <https://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/jbpl/vol8no1/Vol8Iss1_JBPL_2_Mizzell_Huizing.pdf>

Patterson, S. E. (2016). Biblical foundations of Christian leadership: Part 1. *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*, 10(2), 78-89. <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jacl/vol10/iss2/8/>

Locke, L. G., & Smith B. (2021, January 15). Guest post: Is servant leadership Christian? *Christian Scholar’s Review*. <https://christianscholars.com/guest-post-is-servant-leadership-christian/>

1. All Scripture references will be from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise indicated. Crossway, *Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)