

# LEADERSHIP OR SERVANTHOOD?

*Hwa Yung*

Everywhere in the church today throughout the world there is this drumbeat of emphasis on leadership and leadership training. This is true of local and national churches, colleges and seminaries, youth groups and parachurch organizations, and so forth. And woe betide the pastor or institutional leader who fails to run leadership development programs of one sort or another.

Good and great leadership is certainly needed in the church and the Bible is full of such examples. Yet, at discussions and seminars I have often asked the question, "Where does Scripture teach or encourage leadership training in the church?" Invariably the participants scramble all over the Bible and end up stumped! I suggest that there is not a single verse in Scripture that stresses this. The preoccupation with leadership training appears to have resulted from the church jumping on the corporate and academic bandwagon, and unthinkingly adopting its agenda, often with negative consequences.

In recent years there has been a flood of revelations concerning Christian leadership failures everywhere. These include power and financial abuses among megachurch pastors and institutional leaders, sexual sin among Catholic priests and Protestant preachers, politicking for advancement and promotion, and so forth. With the constant drumbeat about leadership in the modern church encouraging and even sanctifying self-seeking ambition and celebrity status, are we being largely blinded to the serious leadership crisis in the church today? For all our talk about wanting to glorify God, the ever-present temptation to "steal God's glory" lurks everywhere in our ministry.

Could this be the precise reason why the Bible is silent on the leadership development emphasis in the modern sense? Instead, central in the New Testament is that the call to ministry is first and foremost to be servants of Christ in his church. Until and unless this is fully understood, internalized, and lived out in our lives, any talk about leadership roles will almost certainly incur the danger of our being sucked into the quagmire of ambition and self-seeking.

The late missionary statesman and scholar, Bishop Stephen Neill, a generation ago commented on the training of ministers for the gospel in the newer churches in the Majority World as follows: "If we set out to produce a race of leaders, what we shall succeed in doing is probably to produce a race of restless, ambitious and discontented intellectuals. To tell a man he is called to be a leader is the best way of ensuring his spiritual ruin, since in the Christian world ambition is more deadly than any other sin."<sup>1</sup>

1. Cited in Oswald J. Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, rev. ed.

Yet, almost everywhere in the global church today, we are encouraging men and women in ministerial training to aspire to leadership!

The New Testament's focus on the call to servanthood, rather than leadership, is abundantly clear throughout. In the classic story of Mark 10:35-45, James and John's request to be seated at the right and left of the Master (that is, for the plum jobs in the new cabinet) when Jesus is anointed the Davidic king in Jerusalem is met with a simple answer. "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all (10:43-44)." To press home the point, Jesus goes on to say, "For even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45). He was and is the ultimate model servant.

We find the same emphasis in the vocabulary for ministry in the New Testament, with the words for servant (*diakonos*) and bondsman (*doulos*), and their cognate verbs, being the words mainly used. Moreover, when we examine the apostles' self-identities in their writings, every one of them understands himself to be a servant of Christ (Rom 1:1; Jas 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1; Rev 1:1; etc.). And it is the lowlier word *doulos* that is used, rather than *diakonos*.

It is important to note that what Jesus and his apostles emphasized is servanthood and not "servant leadership," as suggested by many. Various writers including Robert Banks, Duane Elmer and Steve Hayner have pointed out the inadequacies of the latter term for understanding New Testament servanthood. In particular, the term may actually betray a primary desire for leadership status, with "servant" being tacked on to mask our real self-seeking ambitions. Thus, to have a proper grasp of biblical servanthood, we must examine what the Bible says about it in itself, without having it distorted by being looked at through the leadership lens.

Inseparably linked to the question of leadership or servanthood in ministry is the issue of authority. After all, for the work of God's kingdom to advance, our ministry must carry authority – spiritual authority to be precise. The ministry of Jesus, whether in his preaching and teaching, or in realm of the supernatural signs and wonders, was marked by an authority which onlookers recognized immediately (e.g., Mark 1:22, 27, 34; 2:11; 4:41; 5:21-43; etc.). Nevertheless, in his earthly ministry, Jesus does not point to himself as having an authority of his own, even though he is the Second Person of the Trinity. Instead, we find him repeatedly asserting that "the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father

(Chicago, IL: Moody, 1994), 148.

doing” (John 5:19), and that “I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father has taught me” (8:28).<sup>2</sup> In other words, Jesus’ incarnate life was lived in total submission to the Father, doing only what the Father willed. Yet, paradoxically, precisely because he lived in total submission to the Father, he could therefore exercise the fullness of his Father’s authority through the power of the Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

The same principle applies to us. Jesus asserts this when he said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). This was said in the context of Jesus telling his disciples that “it is to your advantage that I go away” (John 16:7), because only after he goes will the Holy Spirit be sent.

To sum up, Jesus modelled servanthood for us, and that includes his total submission to the Father. We are similarly called to servanthood and to live in total submission to God, both being inseparably linked. When that happens, we will then be able to exercise the Father’s authority in the power of the Spirit, in exactly the same way as it was exercised in Jesus’ life on earth.

Unfortunately, these biblical emphases on servanthood and that spiritual authority flows out of total submission to the Father have been largely missing in our Christian theology of ministry. Instead, the church at large has opted to follow the way of the world which thinks of authority primarily in terms of the executive powers which leaders have. And since it is the church or institutional leader that holds executive power, we must therefore aspire for organizational or institutional leadership if we are to have authority. The overall tendency then is to speak of leadership in terms that are not very different from the way the world around us does, with the language, concepts, and underlying motivations assumed in such discourses largely borrowed from secular leadership studies.

Could it be that, as noted by Samuel Escobar in his critique of “managerial missiology,” much of our thinking on church ministry and mission have succumbed to modernity’s scientific-technological approach? Do not most of us assume that if only there are sufficient resources such as suitably trained personnel, money, proper strategic planning and sound management, the church will invariably grow and our mission goals achievable without fail? The whole exercise hardly differs from the corporate management and leadership techniques used in selling Coca-Cola and smart phones. With such sound management thinking what need is there for God in the whole process?

Yet the evidence before us, both in church history and

2. Cf. also John 5:20; 6:38; 8:28-29; 12:49-50; 14:30-31; etc.

3. For details of the argument see Hwa Yung, *Leadership or Servanthood: Walking in the Steps of Jesus* (Carlisle: Langham, 2021), 38-46, building on the work of J. I. Packer, Gerald F. Hawthorne and others.

today, is that ultimately the gospel does not advance merely or primarily through good management and leadership techniques, important as these may be. Rather, it advances through men and women who are “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). This is clearly seen in the amazing growth of the church in the Majority World in the past century. Examples of this include the powerful ministries of Prophet Harris (1913 onwards) in West Africa and Simon Kimbangu (1921 onwards) in Congo, the rapid spread of Christianity in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa and Pentecostal growth in Latin America in the latter half of the century, and the gospel’s advance in Korea, through grassroot churches in India and house churches in China, and so forth. In many cases, against intense opposition and left with nothing but God, the revivals came. As they say, the rest is history.

Could it be that this ultimate dependence on the Holy Spirit is largely missing in our leadership thinking in the modern church? It is not only a problem in the West but a global one. This is not to say that everything taught today in our leadership training programs are wrong and a waste of time. Indeed there is much that is good and useful, and many of us can indeed benefit immensely from these. But when the church forgets the Holy Spirit and that divine authority is indispensable for the Kingdom’s advance, all our human efforts by themselves will come to naught. As our Lord says: “Apart from me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Hence, Scripture does not appear to encourage us to strive for leadership in itself. Rather, we need to recover the centrality of servanthood and the practice of total submission to the Father, which Jesus modelled for us, in our theology of ministry. This means that if we live by the ways of this world and ambitiously strive for leadership, we will fail to attain it. Even if we manage to get ourselves into some significant leadership roles, we will still fail because our exercise of leadership will be badly compromised by ambition and self-seeking. But if, instead, we learn to die to self and faithfully serve Christ and others, in total obedience to the Father, our lives and work will have leadership impact even when we have not sought it.



Hwa Yung  
hwayung@gmail.com

*Bishop Hwa Yung is the Bishop Emeritus of the Methodist Church in Malaysia. He has served as a pastor, Principal of the Malaysia Theological Seminary and also taught in Trinity Theological College, Singapore. From 2004-2012 he was the Bishop of the Methodist Church in Malaysia. Formerly, he had also served as the Chair for the Trustees Council of the Oxford Centre for the Mission Studies, a member of the International Board of the Lausanne Movement, and President of IFES (2011-2019).*