

Dialogue I

Response to “Stewardship-Leadership: A Biblical Refinement of Servant-Leadership”

Virgil Smith
Biola University

According to Beadles, the purpose of his article is to “examine servant-leadership and to propose an extension that would bring the theory into better alignment with the Scriptures” (Beadles, 2000). Even the title of the article would lead the reader to suppose that his purpose is extension of the theory. However, if Beadles is correct and the theory is not biblical, there is no point extending it—one can only start over. I believe this is what Beadles’ work actually leads us to. Rather than being an extension of servant-leadership, Beadles’ work attempts to point out a fatal flaw in the theory as it stands and then describes what a replacement theory should look like.

The author points out that if our desire is to have a truly biblical theory of leadership, it is necessary to examine not only the theoretical structure, but also the motivations that structure attaches to. He is correct in this, since the motivations behind actions are

normally consistent with the actions. Moreover, motivations are of great importance to God. While He may turn a thing to good, even in the extreme case where man intended it for evil (see for example, Genesis 50:18-20), there is no guarantee that He will do so. Hence, Scripture consistently warns us to examine our own motives to assure that they are right (e.g., I Chronicles 28:9; Proverbs 16:2; I Corinthians 4:5; and James 4:3), and there is a responsibility for error even if that error is unintentional (Leviticus 5:4). Our salvation does not hang by such things, but none of us would willingly choose to be in error—nor should we teach a theory as biblical (i.e., true) that is flawed in this regard. Therefore, Beadles’ contention that the theory of servant-leadership is not biblical cannot be dismissed lightly.

I suppose that any theory that is promoted by both Christians

and non-Christians should raise a red flag in our minds. After all, there is such a fundamental difference in the assumptions and values of the two groups (II Corinthians 6:14-15) that agreement should be immediately suspect. However, it is just possible that servant-leadership may be an exception. Just as we cannot dismiss Beadles' accusations lightly, we should not accept them untried.

My experience has been that there are three common methods of argument for a business or economic theory. First, there is the social argument. This argument maintains that the theory is "correct" because it helps society or groups of people or makes them feel better about themselves. Many of the arguments we commonly hear for trust and empowerment in the workplace have this approach. Second, there is the profit argument. That is, in the long run it is more profitable to do things this way, and after all, business exists for the benefit of the shareholders. In a strange mixture of this argument with the social argument, we find it often said that we should be in favor of more profit, since we can then do more good. Many of the discussions seeking ethical

conduct in business depend on the profit argument by itself or the profit argument combined with the social argument.

It seems obvious that these first two types of arguments, with few changes, will be accepted just as readily by non-believers as by believers. However, the third way to argue the validity of a business theory is rarely, if ever, acceptable to the non-Christian. This third way, the biblical argument, is to assume that ultimate truth is found only through God and His Word. The business theory must be humbly and carefully examined and placed under the authority of the Word of God, handled maturely. Assuming the theory holds up under its examination by the Word, we can declare it to be "biblical."

Therefore, one can never really say that a business theory is biblical until it has been fully examined by God's Word. However, we all have a tendency to pronounce some theory we like as "biblical" without going through all of the necessary work. It is common to find people who repeat statements brought forth through the social and profit arguments (especially the social) and conclude that the theory is therefore biblical. It seems highly

likely that this has been the fate of servant-leadership—even the title just sounds so Christian! It must be biblical! We are lulled into a lack of vigilance.

Biblical or Not?

In regard to the three arguments, most discussions of servant-leadership clearly fit into the social camp. Therefore, they tend to be basically acceptable to non-believers as well as believers. However, the social argument will never be able to answer questions regarding the biblicality of the theory. These answers can only be obtained through searching Scripture.

Beadles begins this task and immediately finds a snag. This snag is the same as that of most social arguments—the servant-leadership theory leaves out God. It is no good to talk about serving people when we are not first serving our Maker. In fact, like most other social argument theories, servant-leadership struggles with the agency problem. It never really answers the question of why the leader should not act for his or her own good rather than for the good of others. Bring God into the picture, however, and this problem goes away. If we exist to serve our God, and Scripture says

one of the primary ways to do that is through serving others, we will subjugate our personal interests for the good of others because it is what our Master desires.

Beadles argues that the servant-leadership theory is not biblical because its primary creator, Robert Greenleaf, left no place for God in the theory. He makes the general argument that Greenleaf was more clearly swayed by his mysticism than his Christianity. While Beadles provides one line of reasoning, I decided to verify this. So, I somewhat randomly opened Greenleaf's *Servant-Leadership* (1977) and started reading. I almost immediately found evidence supportive of Beadles' position. Greenleaf says,

If we view Moses as a human leader, subject to error like the rest of us ... he may have yielded to the temptation, common to this day, to attribute the law to "those higher up" rather than to assume the burden of justification himself. We do not know his conditions; he may have felt that he could not be sufficiently persuasive as a mere rational man. But how much better it would be for us today, if, as the inspired man he undoubtedly was, he had

presented the law as a reasonable codification of experience and wisdom, a summary of those sensible rules to guide individual conduct and as the basis of a good society. This would have opened the way for continued growth of the law with further experience, and would have made the rational justification of the law always a contemporary concern (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 247).

Greenleaf appears to assume the biblical law was something that Moses made up. Moreover, he argues that it should be updated so that it remains contemporary. However, God consistently refers to it as *the law of the LORD* (see, for instance, Exodus 13:9; II Kings 10:31; I Chronicles 16:40; 22:12; II Chronicles 12:1; 17:9; 19:8; 31:3, 4; 34:14; 35:26; Ezra 7:10; Nehemiah 9:3; Psalms 1:2; 19:7; 119:1; Isaiah 5:24; Jeremiah 8:8; and Amos 2:4), indicating that Moses was just the errand boy entrusted with delivery. As such, it is not up to Moses, or any other man, to make changes—and if God is truly immutable, as Dick Chewing rightly argues in another place in this edition of the **JBIB**, we shouldn't hold our breath waiting for Him to make changes.

Clearly Greenleaf is not biblical here. Lest we think that is just a fluke, a few pages away I found him saying,

There – is – no – way for competent persons to gain superior wisdom for these times ... except to immerse themselves in the record of a person like George Fox who had it to a remarkable degree, and then wait with wonder and expectancy for new insight. They will go along the path of objective knowledge and analysis as far as these will take them – which sometimes is not very far. Then they will have a process, a learnable process, one that is unique to them, by which they will receive, experimentally, the dependable insight that will guide them the rest of the way. And they do not ask what that insight is or from whence it comes. They simply accept it, welcome it with gratitude, believe it, act on it (Greenleaf, 1977, pp. 230-231, emphasis mine).

This is Greenleaf writing as a mystic, and with mysticism clearly dominating his religion. Note that he is arguing that this “method” is experimental, and you are not to consider where the insight comes from (that jalapeño pizza you just ate?) or even *what*

it is, yet the results of the method are to be believed without question! This emphasis on belief or faith in the insights so derived is referred to over and over throughout the book. However, Greenleaf never says what the faith is supposed to be *in*. If we are not to question where the ideas come from, how will we ever know what we are to have faith in? It is not clear that the faith is in oneself. Nor is it clear that the faith is centered externally. It just is. Talk about blind faith!

Greenleaf argues that this form of information gathering should be central in the servant-leader's arsenal. Yet, the Bible tells us that knowledge only comes from the Lord (Psalms 119:65-66; Proverbs 2:6; 10:31-32; 22:12; Isaiah 33:5-6; John 8:31-32; Colossians 2:2-4; I Timothy 3:14-15; Titus 1:1-3; and I John 2:4-5).

It appears fairly conclusive that Greenleaf was not seeking to create a biblical theory at all (i.e., one drawn from Scripture). For that reason, it is probably inappropriate to try to make it fit into that mold. However, one could argue that even though the theory was not intended to be biblical, it still might be so. Beadles' arguments shine here.

He concludes that the servant-leadership theory fails to be biblical because it is man-centered, whereas a truly biblical theory of leadership would be God-centered. In this he is (biblically) correct.

Now What?

Do we throw the servant-leadership theory out altogether? No. It is very useful for working with non-believers who would never accept a biblical argument but can be convinced by a social one. While the theory is not centered around God, it does urge leaders to actions that are correct, and thus is probably the highest form of leadership the unbeliever can rise to. However, servant-leadership as it stands is not sufficient for the believer. Beadles correctly argues that God needs to be explicitly placed at the center of the theory for it to be biblical. However, we must understand that doing so will create a different theory that only believers will accept. The very fact of making a leadership theory that is biblical will mean it will not be acceptable to non-believers. Anyone ready to take on the task?

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