The Clay Feet of Servant Leadership

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ABSTRACT: The modern philosophy of servant leadership was introduced 50 years ago. Since that time it has been developed into a much-studied leadership theory. It has also enjoyed substantial adoption by businesses and other organizations, and its adoption has been found to correlate with several positive outcomes. At the same time, some in the Christian community have come to identify servant leadership with Christ, Christianity, and the Bible. A few have gone so far as to claim it is a biblical mandate for Christian leaders. In this article, the author will investigate whether such identification is warranted. The author will analyze the theory's origins, exegete two Bible passages often cited in support of identifying servant leadership with Christ, and compare some of Christ's actions against certain published requirements of servant leadership theory. The author will conclude that identifying servant leadership with Christianity is unwarranted and may cause Christians to accept the theory without critical review. This uncritical acceptance could potentially undermine both further development of the theory and the performance of Christian leaders.

KEYWORDS: servant leadership, Christian leadership, biblical leadership

INTRODUCTION

It is now 50 years since Robert Greenleaf gave the series of lectures on leadership at Dartmouth College that became the core of his work on servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1996). Next year will mark a half century since Robert Greenleaf published the seminal essay that was the genesis of the modern servant leadership movement. His book, *The Servant as Leader*, outlined a leadership philosophy that was contrary to contemporary theories of command-and-control autocracy (Greenleaf, 1970). Servant leadership called upon leaders to ensure the needs of their employees were met before caring for their own. It called on leaders to exercise humility, listening, and other attributes then considered more suitable for followers than leaders (Greenleaf, 1970).

Over the last 50 years, servant leadership theory has been studied and developed by a wide range of scholars and practitioners. Cincala and Chase (2018) report that published books on servant leadership grew from 15 in the decade of the 1970's to 265 in the 2000's. During this time, numerous organizations, including several publicly traded corporations, have adopted servant leadership (e.g., Hunter, 2004, p. 18). These adoptions have allowed leadership academics to begin researching the impact of servant leadership on various organizational results (Heyler & Martin, 2018). At the same time, the Christian community, including some churches and Christian universities, have begun to embrace servant leadership (Specht & Broholm, 2004). Part of their acceptance of the theory is that they view it as identified with Christianity, Christ, and the Bible (Beadles II, 2000; Cedar, 1987, Cincala, 2018; D'Netto, 2018).

The purpose of this article is to examine whether that identification is warranted. The article will begin with a brief account of the development of servant leadership as a leadership theory and then identify some of the authors and arguments that have led to the notable adoption of servant leadership by Christians and among Christian organizations. The author will then analyze the theory's origins in Greenleaf (1970) and argue that it did not result from a biblical exegetical process. The author will then exegete two Bible passages that have been cited in support of identifying servant leadership with Christ (Matthew 20:25-28 and Luke 22:24-27) and argue that they are open to alternative interpretations. The author will finally compare some of Christ's actions as reported in the Gospels with certain requirements of servant leadership theory, as articulated by leading servant leadership authors. The author will argue that Christ failed to meet those requirements. The article will conclude that identifying servant leadership with Christianity is unwarranted and may cause Christians to accept the theory without critical review. This uncritical acceptance could potentially undermine both further development of the theory and the performance of Christian leaders and organizations.

THE GROWTH OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP THEORY

Since Greenleaf's initial publication in 1970, many leadership theorists have contributed to developing the servant leadership philosophy. They have offered multiple lists of elements and criteria that they assert comprise the servant leadership approach (Roberts, 2015). Multiple survey instruments have been developed to test for the presence of servant leadership within organizations (Kiker, Callahan, & Kiker, 2019).

In his short essay on servant leadership, DePree (2002) lays out three things he claims are vital for servant leadership: "an understanding of the fiduciary nature of leadership," "a broadened definition of leadership competence," and "the enlightenment afforded leaders by a moral purpose" (Depree, 2002, p. 91). Depree (2002) then follows up with "five essential paths" and a separate "five areas in which leaders can build their competence" (Depree, 2002, p. 92). Autry (2001) prescribes "five ways of being" (p. 10). Those ways require servant leaders to be authentic, vulnerable, accepting, present, and useful (Autry, 2001). Autry (2001) provides more detailed requirements for servant leaders as well, such as the utilization of performance standards crafted by the employees themselves and inviting employees to evaluate their superiors' performance (p. 65, 72). Keith (2008) prescribes seven key practices for servant leaders: self-awareness; listening; changing the pyramid; developing your colleagues; coaching, not controlling; unleashing the energy and intelligence of others; and foresight. Keith (2008) also distinguishes servant leadership from other models of leadership by contrasting the different roles of power for the leader. Servant leaders receive power from those they lead through trust. Non-servant leaders must take power and then expend resources to hang onto it as others try to take it away from them (Keith, 2008, p. 26). In his brief article on the topic, Tarallo (2018) states, "One bedrock principle: successful servant leadership starts with a leader's desire to serve his or her staff, which in turn serves and benefits the organization at large" (p. 2). From the universe of servant leadership material already at his disposal, Tarallo (2018) identifies listening, humility, encouragement, and trust as the critical success factors for servant leadership.

The process of articulating and defining servant leadership continues with successive authors focusing on various elements and under-emphasizing others. Liu (2019) describes the multiple extant definitions of servant leadership as a "fractured field" (p. 2). It is an area now ripe for meta-analysis and potentially in need of intellectual convergence.

Numerous corporations and other organizations have adopted the servant leadership philosophy during its 50-year history. Hunter (2004) identifies such household names as Wal-Mart, Southwest Airlines, Marriott International, Nestlé USA, Federal Express, and Medtronic as practitioners of servant leadership. McGee-Cooper, Looper, and Trammell (2007) describe six different organizations from the Dallas, Texas, area that have adopted a servant leadership approach. Their list includes some non-corporate organizations such as Parkland Hospital and the Carrollton, Texas, Police Department (McGee-Cooper, Looper, & Trammell, 2007). More recently, Sivasubramaniam (2017) reports that Starbucks and Nordstrom have become servant leadership companies.

Over time, these organizations generated operating results while applying a servant leadership philosophy. Business academics were then able to study those results and sought to identify the impact of servant leadership. Carter and Baghurst (2013) performed a qualitative phenomenological study on a focus group of the employees of Dallas-based Celebration Restaurant, a company that identified itself as utilizing servant leadership. The results of the study indicate that servant leadership improves employee engagement, loyalty, and commitment to the workplace (Carter & Baghurst, 2013). Grant (2013) reports that servant leaders are more productive. Peterson, Galvin and Lange (2012) found that a CEO's practice of servant leadership was positively correlated to superior return on investment.

Servant leadership has become part of the larger leadership theory landscape. Like other parts of that landscape, business leadership scholars continue to refine and extend servant leadership as part of the typical continuing action of intellectual development (Heyler & Martin, 2018). Patterson and Winston (2003) categorize servant leadership as a subset of transformational leadership. Chan and Mak (2014) studied applications of servant leadership philosophy in Chinese organizations. They found that while servant leadership positively impacted employee trust, its effects were most pronounced among new employees. Chan and Mak (2014) recommend that managers of longer tenured employees apply a different leadership approach such as transactional leadership. Kiker, Callahan, and Kiker (2019) found that gender tended to moderate the effects of servant leadership.

Babyak (2018) offers a critique of servant leadership based on doctrinal concerns and suggests that a more biblical model of leadership be developed to refine or replace servant leadership. Beadles II (2000) suggests that servant leadership is not "sufficiently unique" for the role it is being placed in by Christian leadership theorists and offers an alternative model of "stewardship-leadership." Kirkpatrick (2019) sought to articulate how servant leadership could be incorporated into business academic curriculum to prepare students for its application in the business world.

CHRISTIAN REACTION

Unlike other leadership theories, servant leadership has also captured the attention of the church. Christian pastors and ministry leaders have embraced servant leadership and developed their own branch of applications and analysis apart from the business community and business academics. Stasak (2019), a writer for Wycliffe Bible Translators, published her own six elements of servant leadership citing both Old and New Testament sources. Cedar (1987) reinterpreted the "love verses" from I Corinthians 13:4-7, substituting the term, "servant leadership" for "love" therein (p. 47). Some Christian business academics have also participated in this development, applying scriptural texts to support various interpretations and applications of servant leadership. Blanchard and Hodges' (2005) book, *Lead Like Jesus: Lessons from the Greatest Leadership Role Model of All Time*, opens with recommendations from such pastoral notables as Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, and Henry Blackaby.

Through these and other efforts, servant leadership has become identified with Christianity and particularly identified with Christ himself (e.g., Blanchard & Miller, 2009). This identification is often defended by reference to multiple New Testament texts in which some Christian theorists propose that Jesus not only practiced servant leadership but commanded it (e.g., Burkhart, 2015). Two of the texts cited for this argument are Matthew 20:25-28 and Luke 22:24-27. Each of these texts involve Christ speaking with his disciples and have been interpreted to be lessons on leadership (e.g., Stasak, 2019). Based on this interpretation of these and some other Gospel texts, some Christian authors have argued that servant leadership is the only leadership style acceptable for Christians (Beadles II, 2000; Burkhart, 2015; Cedar, 1987).

A CRITICAL REVIEW

The acceptance, propagation, and prescription of servant leadership is worthy of critical review. Improperly applied, it has the potential to undermine business leadership theory development and thus the performance of businesses which adopt it. Liu (2019), for example, found that in some cultures, the application of servant leadership principles actually undermined the leader's leadership position. More importantly, misapplication of servant leadership has the potential to undermine the performance of faith-based organizations and Christian leaders that may feel compelled to apply it. Dalrymple (2017), for instance, notes that attempts at servant leadership strategies that do not address fundamental inequalities among people in a church can lead to failure. In this section, the author will argue that the relationship between servant leadership and Christianity is problematic for three reasons: 1) servant leadership philosophy's non-Christian origins, 2) its inconclusive basis in biblical exegesis, and 3) the failure of Christ to manifest all the behaviors associated with servant leadership theory.

Secular Origins of Servant Leadership

The origins of servant leadership are not based in Scripture. Greenleaf (1970) identifies the basis of his philosophy of servant leadership as *The Journey to the East* by Herman Hesse (1956). Hesse, a Nobel Prize winning author, was the grandson of Christian missionaries in India. His early childhood reportedly involved reading substantial books on eastern religion and his novel, Sidhartha, is a story of the protagonist's spiritual journey based in Buddhism (Hesse, 1954). Hesse acknowledged Christian influences in his life but might also be categorized as a universalist. He is quoted by Gellner (n.d.) to claim, "The god we have to believe in dwells within us."

Robert Greenleaf (1996) identified himself with the Quaker church. "I happen to be a Quaker by persuasion. I am a backsliding member as far as the contemporary Religious Society of Friends is concerned, but the Quaker tradition is the source of such religious orientation as I have" (p. 290). Outside of *The Servant as Leader*, Greenleaf occasionally cites biblical stories and particularly Gospel texts to illuminate his views on servant leadership (e.g., Greenleaf, 1996, p. 325). It is unclear, however, whether he considers those Scriptures authoritative. In one of his lectures at Dartmouth College, Greenleaf describes a decision he had made "to be my own theologian" (p. 324). One of the theological tenets he had adopted was, "to

regard all scriptures of all religions as great stories of the human spirit and take them for the insight they yield on that basis" (p. 324).

It seems defensible to argue that modern servant leadership theory did not arise from a robust exegetical process. Rather, Scripture seems to be employed as a rich but secondary source of examples of the tenets of servant leadership that Greenleaf sought to develop.

Biblical Exegesis

The Bible's own support for the philosophy of servant leadership appears debatable. Old Testament concepts of leadership were centered on Yahweh as Israel's only true leader. Moses, arguably the most powerful leader the Hebrew nation ever had, was referred to both by the text, by God, and by himself, as God's servant (e.g., Deuteronomy 34:5; Numbers 11:11; Numbers 12:8; Joshua 1:2; I Kings 8:56; Psalm 15:26; Hebrews 3:5; Revelation 15:3). The distinction between God's leadership and that of human leaders is highlighted in the story of I Samuel 8 when the Israelites demanded that the Prophet Samuel appoint an earthly king to rule over them:

> Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah and said to him, "Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations." But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." And Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them." I Samuel 8:4-7. (ESV)

God acquiesces to the appointment of a leader but describes him as wrongfully supplanting God's own position in the nation.

Christ's articulation of his own role in his earthly mission mirrors this Old Testament theme of Yahweh as the sole leader of God's people. Christ repeatedly describes himself as "son of man," identifying with messianic prophecies such as Daniel 7:13. In describing himself as son, Jesus also adopts a relationship of dependence on, and service to, the Father. In terms of his activity, Jesus describes himself as reliant on the Father for power and direction. "So Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise'" (John 5:19). In terms of control over the future, Jesus defers exclusively to the Father. "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only" (Matthew 24:36; see also Mark 13:32). Even on the question of leadership itself, Jesus defers to the Father as the only one who can grant those positions: "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father" (John 20:23). While fully accepting his divinity and salvific power, the early church repeatedly adopts the title of "your [the Father's] Holy servant Jesus" for the person of Christ (Acts 4:27; 4:30).

It is clear from the Gospels that Christ is a person of great power and authority. He exercises that authority by demonstrating control over demonic beings (e.g., Mark 1:39), over sickness (e.g., Luke 4:40), over the wind and the sea (e.g., Mark 4:39), over other natural objects, (e.g., Mark 11:21; John 6:11-14). Jesus does not generally, however, exercise authority in that same way over people. He acquiesces to his own capture and torture (Matthew 26:57-68). When many of his disciples turn away from him for his challenging teaching, he invites his 12 chosen disciples to leave also (John 6:66-67). When invited to pronounce judgment over a woman caught in the act of adultery, he refuses (John 8:1-11). When encouraged to take political control of the country, he declines (Acts 1:6-7).

Despite these general themes within Scripture of the exclusive nature of divine leadership and the person of Christ, there are particular passages that have been found susceptible to interpretation as supporting servant leadership. Those who hold to the biblical origins (or at least biblical support) of servant leadership site numerous scriptural sources for that argument. Two of the more prominent such passages are Matthew 20: 25-28 and Luke 22:24-27 (e.g., Beadles II, 2000, Blanchard & Hodges, 2005; Cincala & Chase, 2018).

Matthew 20:25-28. This instruction by Jesus to his disciples (also reported in Mark 10) immediately follows the request by the mother of John and James to have her sons placed in positions of leadership in Christ's coming kingdom. The other 10 disciples become indignant at this request and Jesus addresses the issue directly:

> Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever

> wants to be first must be your slave just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Matthew 20:25-28

The argument for biblical servant leadership is that Jesus is instructing his disciples in a new way to lead, not by the use of power and the exercise of authority but by service. There are a number of commentators who would support this interpretation. The 2nd century church father, Origen, interprets this text as instruction to those in leadership positions. He contrasts "carnal" rulers using compulsion with more spiritual leaders who rely on the free will of their followers. "Those rulers who are spiritual ought to rest their power in the love of their subjects, not in their fears" (Lange, 1865, p.866).

There is more than adequate ancient and modern commentary, however, that might be read to favor a different interpretation. Jesus may not be teaching about leadership at all. Rather than teaching great people how to lead, the passage may be interpreted as Jesus teaching his disciples how to be great by taking the position of a servant rather than that of a leader. Jesus may be calling on his disciples to eschew (as he did) the exercise of any leadership over other people. John Chrysostom, the 4th century Bishop of Constantinople, interprets Matthew 20:25-28 as a condemnation of those who would seek greatness through leadership rather than through service. He states,

> For they harm and disgrace themselves most, who on this wise seek the first places, for they are among the last. For matters with us are not like matters without. "For the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them," but with me the last, even he is first. (Chrysostom, 1859, p.883)

For Chrysostom, Jesus is redefining greatness, not leadership.

In the same way, modern commentators Walvoord and Zuck (1983) interpret the passage as Jesus correcting his disciples' views of associating greatness with leadership. One does not become great by having a leadership position as the two disciples and their mother requested for them. One becomes great by following Christ's example of serving to the point of martyrdom. "Greatness in the Lord's kingdom does not come through rulership or authority but through service. Their goal should be serving, not ruling" (Walvoord & Zuck, 1983, p.66).

The "correct" interpretation of Matthew 20:25-28 may turn on the meaning of the word "great" in verse 26. If greatness in this verse means having a great, or leadership, position, then the whole passage might be best interpreted as Christ's instruction on how to lead—through serving. If, however, "great" in that context is interpreted in the more generic sense of "impressive or grand" (Lexico, 2019), then Jesus might be better understood as teaching his disciples how to be impressive or grand in the kingdom of God—by serving rather than by leading.

What contributes to neither interpretation being conclusive is that the Greek word translated "great" in verse 26 is μέγας (transliterated "megas"), from which we derive the prefix mega. That Greek word is used 20 times in Matthew. Sometimes it is used to refer to something having extraordinary size or other impressive attributes, such as the great light in Matthew 4:16, or the great storm in Matthew 8:24. But it is also used sometimes as an indicator of rank, as in Matthew 5:19, where one who obeys and teaches the commandments is referred to as great in the kingdom of heaven.

Luke 22:24-27. This passage reports a conversation between Christ and his disciples at the last supper. After revealing that one of them will betray Jesus, the disciples enter into an argument over which of them was the "greatest."

> A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves." Luke 22:24-27

This passage is also cited by those claiming biblical origins for the theory of servant leadership, and there is certainly some support for this proposition. One ancient source understood this passage to refer to a dispute among the disciples as to who would take Jesus' place as leader of the group after he had been betrayed (Greek EX, n.d.). The modern commentator Gundry (1994) holds that in this text, Jesus is teaching great people how to lead. Jesus, he claims, does not redefine greatness. He just tells the great people to serve in a lowly way. He preserves the concept of greatness but redirects the activity of great people (Gundry, 1994, p. 24).

As with the Matthew 20 text, however, there is ample support for the proposition that Jesus is teaching his disciples about greatness rather than leadership. The theolo-

gian and Doctor of the early church, Cyril of Alexandria, sees this text as Jesus redefining greatness in kingdom terms. He interprets Jesus' words to contrast how gentiles define greatness with how Christians become great: "Let our exaltation consist in humility" (Cyril, 1859, Sermon CXLIII). The fourth century theologian, Basil the Great, who supported the Nicene Creed at the Council of Constantinople and spent much of his career refuting Arianism, also interprets this text as Jesus exalting the greatness of humility and calls on Christians to exercise the virtue (Basil, n.d.). Walvoord and Zuck (1983) again interpret this passage as Christ's exposition on greatness, not on leadership. "Thinking about who is greatest is what pagans think about. They should not worry about who is the greatest but desire to be the one who serves" (Walvoord & Zuck, 1983, p. 259).

Biblical exegesis also reveals the same interpretation difficulties as in the Matthew 20 text. A comparative form of greatness, the Greek word, μείζων, is employed in verses 24, 26, and 27. This Greek word is used a total of only six times in the Gospel of Luke. In Luke 12:18 it is used to refer to the foolish man who determined to tear down his old barns and build greater ones (meaning bigger or with more capacity for his crops). But it is also used in Luke 7:28 in comparing John the Baptist, whom Jesus holds in very high regard, to the least in the kingdom of heaven (whom Jesus says is greater than John). The Luke 7:28 passage itself could be interpreted to refer to greatness in some preeminence sense or to a position of hierarchical leadership.

Space constrains us from pursuing the same analysis of other texts cited in support of the biblical genesis of servant leadership. Even placing these two central texts in question, however, may be sufficient to bring the entire enterprise under scrutiny.

Christ as an Imperfect Servant Leader

A critical review of the connection between servant leadership and Christianity might also focus on how the activity of Christ, as recorded in the Gospels, compares to the tenets of servant leadership as advanced by various leadership theorists. In this analysis, Christ is recorded as having demonstrated many of the attributes used to define servant leadership. Greenleaf (1970) describes a central tenet of servant leadership as prioritizing the needs of others (p. 15). One might describe Jesus as prepared to sacrifice the perceived needs of his disciples to those of his mission (e.g., Matthew 16:23; Babyak, 2018, p. 61). However, the mission of Jesus is itself to sacrifice himself to meet the highest need of all people, reconciliation with God. In that more profound sense, Jesus would seem to epitomize Greenleaf's requirement of being other-focused. Jesus also reflects personal attributes such as humility and grace that a number of leadership writers consider fundamental to practicing servant leadership (e.g., Blanchard, 2005, p. 66, p. 78; Hunter, 2004, p. 94).

At the same time, however, Christ appears to fail some of the requirements of servant leadership as defined in the modern leadership literature. Autry (2001), requires that servant leaders operate with a certain amount of mutuality and democracy, even in such traditionally hierarchical matters as employment reviews. Autry (2001) suggests that employees have important input in establishing their own performance standards (p. 65). Roberts (2015) suggests servant leaders must allow employees to help establish their own compensation systems. Autry (2001) also suggests that every performance evaluation a leader performs of a subordinate should include an evaluation by the subordinate of the leader. Jesus did not allow his followers to establish their own performance criteria and did not invite them to evaluate his work. Even in Matthew 16:15, when Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" it is clear that he is testing their knowledge and faith, not asking for their input into his ministry. Suggestions from the disciples as to how Jesus should conduct his ministry drew some of his most severe rebukes (e.g., Mark 8:33). One might describe Jesus as severely autocratic in this area of follower input.

Blanchard (2005) states that a central role of the servant leader is a visionary role. In her visionary role, the leader must first create a "compelling vision" and then coach her followers in implementing that vision. Blanchard (2005) cites Jesus' calling of the 12 as evidence that Jesus modeled this requirement of servant leadership. It is arguable, however, that Jesus never attempted to create a vision. The vision that he shared with his disciples had been authored long before he was incarnated—some would say before the earth was created depending on your Christian tradition (John 17:5). Jesus draws his picture of the kingdom of God and man's role in it from the Old Testament revelation (Luke 22:37). He also resolutely demurs to the Father with respect to the vision and the choices it requires, even when those choices involve his own death by torture (Matthew 26:39). Further, Jesus shares remarkably little information about the future he expects his disciples to implement (Acts 1:7). Even after his death, they continue to expect a military conquest (Acts 1:6) and are surprised when their faith spreads to

gentile believers (Acts 10:45). If one were to evaluate Jesus on the basis of how well he cast the vision for the early church, one would have to say he painted a very incomplete picture.

Keith (2008) states that a servant leader's power is gifted to her by her followers. He contrasts this source of power with non-servant leaders whom he describes as gaining power by "grabbing" it (p. 26). What Keith (2008) is describing sounds like an application of Zand's Trust Model in which leaders (or others) can gain power over other people by sharing information and acting in predictable ways with respect to that information (Zand, 1972). An orthodox doctrine of Christ, however, would include the proposition that Jesus, like God the Father, was not dependent on his followers for power (John 13:3; Beadles II, 2000, p. 31). As mentioned above, during his earthly ministry, Jesus repeatedly exercised supernatural power over demons, disease, the weather, and other natural elements. Even the influence Jesus exercises over his listeners is sometimes a function of these miraculous demonstrations, rather than his having received their trust. Jesus even suggests to those who do not trust him that they should believe his message because he is able to demonstrate his supernatural power through these signs (John 14:11). An orthodox eschatology also would hold that in Christ's second advent described in Revelation 19 and by Christ himself (Matthew 24:30), Christ will exercise power over those who do not trust or believe him (Erickson, 1998, p. 1197). An in-depth review of Christ as a servant leader, as described by certain servant leadership theorists, would seem to include both positive and negative examples.

CONCLUSION

As a leadership philosophy, servant leadership has much to recommend it. It would appear to offer demonstrable business benefits. Servant leadership has been found to correlate positively with employee engagement and with return on investment (Carter & Baghurst, 2014; Peterson, Galvin, & Lange, 2012). It is purportedly exercised by many companies that have been identified as the best companies (as in most employee-friendly) for which to work (Hunter, 2004, p. 18).

Servant leadership may also have benefits for Christian practitioners beyond its business or organizational impact. It may provide Christian leaders an opportunity to emulate certain characteristics of Christ in the workplace, such as humility and grace. It may allow Christian leaders to participate more presently in the inauguration of the kingdom of God as they learn to earn the trust of their subordinates. In these and other ways, it may provide Christian leaders a more integrated experience of work and faith than some more autocratic forms of leadership (Babyak, 2018).

At the same time, it seems potentially irresponsible to equate servant leadership with Christ, Christianity, or the Bible. Not only were its origins not particularly Christian, its development as leadership theory has involved multiple interpretations and refinements, some of which are not demonstrable from the life of Christ. The rudimentary exegesis performed herein of typical scriptures cited to support (or even prove) servant leadership as a biblical construct are found to leave ample room for debate. It is a defensible proposition that not only was Jesus not teaching about servant leadership in these passages, he was not teaching about leadership at all. Rather, he was teaching about serving the Father, as he continuously demonstrated it. By this teaching and demonstration he was redefining greatness in the upside-down kingdom of God as falling on those who serve, rather than those who lead.

One potential pitfall of equating servant leadership with Christ and Christianity is that it can distract Christians from Christ's call to abject servanthood (Dalrymple, 2015). If it is unclear whether Christ calls us to lead (via servant leadership or any other approach), it is non-controversial that Jesus calls us to serve —all of us. Blanchard (2005) points out that in the KJV Bible "leader" is mentioned only six times while "servant" is mentioned more than 900 and that "Jesus affirmed that God is not looking for leaders but for servants who will let Him be the leader" (p. 47). The possibility that people might profess servant leadership to cynically "baptize" their own ambitions with its connection to Jesus has been identified many times (e.g., The Ghannad Group, 2017; Swanson, n.d.).

Perhaps the most important risk in identifying servant leadership, or any leadership theory, with Scripture is that it invites a lack of critical review. It invites an overinvestment of trust in what originated as a man-made leadership theory. Christian business professionals and business academics must proceed in the work of developing leadership theory, and servant leadership in particular, thoughtfully. Otherwise, they run the risk of basing their developed theories on faulty assumptions and undermining not only the theory in which they have invested but also the performance of Christian leaders in both the business sector and the church.

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