

Servant leadership

Power, authority and leadership are big and sensitive issues:

1. Especially on council estates
2. In British/Western society in general
3. In the conservative evangelical church

What is authority? Probably not what we think

I was helped on these things by Ken Mbugua of Emmanuel Baptist Nairobi. He helped me to see that we are in equal danger of abusing authority and running to the opposite extreme and abdicating responsibility.

- 2 Sam. 23:3-4 – authority exercised rightly, in the fear of the Lord, is a beautiful thing that blesses
- 2 Cor. 10 – really helpful passage which holds together a) humility, gentleness, tender appeal and b) firmness, resolution, contending, disciplining. It also makes some important distinctions:
 - Worldly weapons v. spiritual weapons. The world exercises authority through intimidation, raising the voice, rhetoric, threats, shaming. We are to fight with the Word of grace, the gospel of Christ, wrestling in prayer, depending on the Spirit.
 - Fighting people v. fighting arguments. Our enemy is not flesh and blood but false thinking and the spiritual powers behind that.
 - Power v. authority. Although these words are sometimes used interchangeably, there is a sense in which, in the church, only God, properly speaking, has power in the sense of being able to make things happen, change hearts, move people from one place to another. What we are given is not so much power as authority. People should listen to us because we have been given a particular authority and responsibility for them but we cannot make them listen or obey. Power, in the church, is ‘divine power’ – found in the Word of God and the ordinances.
 - Tear down v. build up. Authority is given to the leaders and teachers not to tear people down but only to build them up. Even church discipline has this redemptive, edifying aspect.
- Do your own Bible overview on the theme of authority. This is such a rich, complex and important theme that it is worth spending many hours reading through the whole Bible story thinking about how the Spirit is teaching us, through the narrative, about how authority works: authority mediated, authority abdicated, authority abused...
- Work on your ecclesiology. Think through [what power and authority mean in the church](#) specifically.
- Teach your church about healthy leadership, dysfunctional leadership, what is abuse. We may think these things are obvious or that they would never happen in our church, but a pastor friend told me how he had felt it necessary to guard his congregation by explicit teaching: “If I threaten or shout at or physically push around someone else, that is completely unacceptable. If you see me do this then you need to call me out.”

I used to think that all that was necessary in gospel ministry was faithful Bible handling. Preach the Word carefully and surely everything else should follow? But I was wrong. Sadly it is possible to have high quality expository preaching and ungodly leadership. It shouldn’t be possible but it is. And it’s a very ugly thing.

It’s worth spending some time as planters thinking hard about servant leadership because:

- a) It doesn’t seem to be very well understood in our constituency. Whether it is the terminology or the substance, often Christian leaders look at you rather blankly when you talk about servant leadership.
- b) In church plants, you have the wonderful opportunity to set the culture. So why not make it as healthy as you possibly can in this area of leadership and authority.

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Servant Leadership is often misunderstood. Servant leadership is not:

1. **A new thing.** Although the term 'servant leadership' and interest in the concept in management circles is quite new (second half of the twentieth century) the idea is a thoroughly biblical one coming out of ancient texts like Deut. 17:18-20; Matt. 20:20-28, large sections of 2 Corinthians; 1 Thess. 2-3 and many others.
2. **An optional style of leadership.** If servant leadership is biblically commanded it is not simply one among many styles of leadership (charismatic leadership, strategic leadership, decisive leadership etc.) it is the only way. Rather than 'servant' qualifying 'leader' it could be argued that it is better to think of 'leader' qualifying 'servant'. All Christians are called to be servants – that is a fundamental identity and activity – and some will serve the body as leaders.
3. **A personality thing.** Servant leadership is not just something for the ESFJ personality. It is not a natural consequence of being a touchy-feely type which won't fit the bulldozer or Spock type. If it is the one commanded biblical form of leadership then it is for all leaders regardless of natural temperament. The Apostle Paul was presumably not a conflict-averse retiring type before he was saved (Acts 9). In fact servant leadership will not come naturally to any of us because we naturally serve ourselves and seek our own praise.
4. **A cultural thing.** You sometimes hear the claim that Africa and Asia need strong dictatorial leaders while servant leadership suits the lack of power distance in Western countries. But if it is a biblical thing then it is for all cultures. It was certainly extremely counter-cultural for first century Jewish and Roman culture when Jesus and the apostles spoke about it.
5. **Gutted leadership.** Sometimes people think that servant leadership is either a contradiction in terms or at least a compromise between two opposite things. In this understanding the servant side of things takes the strength out of the leadership side – ameliorating the driving, dynamic, decisive, disciplinary force of leadership – so servant leadership will be weak, ineffective, toothless. There is a sense in which servant leadership, like the Cross, will look weak and foolish to the world but in that weakness is divine power (2 Cor. 12:10). Also, a look at Paul's letters (e.g. 2 Cor. 10) shows that servant leadership is perfectly compatible with discipline and sharp rebukes – that is a part of loving and serving.
6. **Just for the church.** I used to think that servant leadership was only for the church and that in the world outside the free market and survival of the fittest worked fine but it was an old man in Kenya who pointed out to me that when you don't have servant leadership in local government, construction, transport, education, health and police then everything falls apart – roads have huge potholes because the funding has been 'eaten', doctors and nurses won't go to the harder areas, teachers skip classes, the university system is corrupted and ineffective. At the same time many non-Christian leadership gurus are recognising servant leadership as a very effective way of building and motivating teams and achieving long term goals. This shouldn't be surprising. Because of the way God's wisdom is woven into the fabric of our material and social world, it does indeed work best for everyone when we cut with the grain of God's order and leaders serve others rather than themselves.
7. **A pragmatic management strategy.** Having said all that about the effectiveness of servant leadership it's important to clarify that *biblical* servant leadership (Harrison Mungai puts that helpful initial qualifier) is not simply a pragmatic technique. It is not a psycho-social Machiavellian trick to manipulate people. It is not a means to an end. It is essential and valuable in and of itself regardless of the outcomes.
8. **Pandering to demands.** In [another place](#) I've written about the danger and ugliness of the combination of Servant Leader plus Rebellious Employees. In the modern world, in countries with a small power difference, it is possible for something similar to servant leadership to arise from the cajoling demands of an entitled workforce who feel it is their right to be listened to, pampered with benefits and treated with kid gloves while giving very little loyalty or sacrifice in return. In contrast biblical servant leadership a) comes proactively from the leader themselves (not wrung out of him by those being led); b) will not pander to every desire and whim of those being led because the leader has a higher loyalty (to the Lord) and a greater love and aim for those entrusted to them (their real good not their perceived good).

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9. **Simply menial manual tasks.** The classic images of servant leadership are washing dishes, cleaning toilets, washing feet. Certainly John 13 is a very important servant leadership text. But surely Jesus was not speaking purely literally of washing feet. He was pointing first to his sacrifice on the Cross, then to regular repentance, costly service of others. That service might well involve some hard dirty sweaty physical labour but it will also involve costly speaking and praying and reading and writing. The servant leader must always be willing to clean the toilet (nothing is beneath him) but to delegate some table service to focus on the ministry of prayer and Word is still servant leadership.
10. **Everything there is to say about leadership.** The biblical concept of servant leadership is, I would argue, the most important, core, foundational thing to know about leadership but it is not all there is to say about leadership. There are many useful things that can be said about leadership (meetings, recruitment, communication, strategy, delegation, culture etc.) which may be *consistent* with biblical servant leadership and *in line* with the gospel but are not *explicit* in the biblical text or *necessary* logical out-workings of the gospel. Peter Drucker for example has plenty of helpful things to say on management and leadership but we are free to take or leave them. Craig Hamilton does a good job I think in *Wisdom in Leadership* of first laying out the non-negotiable biblical foundations in section 1 – servant leadership – then moving on in the rest of the book to less authoritative but very helpful wisdom for servant leaders in many practical areas.

Now 10 things that servant leadership is – from 1 Thessalonians, especially chapters 2 and 3:

1. Servant leadership is, wherever possible, **Plural**.¹ A lot of articles and books on leadership assume that it is a personal project. Search Google Images for 'leadership' and you will see lots of clipart of a single figure with a crowd following behind. But the New Testament picture of leadership is far more often of team ministry (Acts 14:23; Romans 16). 1 Thessalonians is a letter from Paul, Silas and Timothy. They were all there in Thessalonica, ministering together. For Paul to be without his co-workers was extremely unusual and painful for him (1 Thess. 3:1-2 cf. 2 Cor. 2:12-13).
2. The basic dynamic of biblical servant leadership is: **Pleasing God** and Loving People. This vertical desire is vital – 'not trying to please people but God who tests our hearts' - 1 Thess. 2:4. The primary accountability is clear: twice Paul says, 'God is my witness' (1 Thess. 2:5, 10). The master is the Lord, not man, not culture, not followers, not pressures inside or outside the church. Interestingly, even secular leadership gurus are beginning to recognise the importance of the leader being submitted to an authority higher than himself.
3. The basic dynamic is: Pleasing God and **Loving People**. The vertical leads to the horizontal – 'we loved you so much' (1 Thess. 2:8). I've been very struck by Andy Mason's point in *God's Leader* that hardly any ministry training courses go out of their way to emphasise love – and yet the Bible tells us that this is a tremendously important quality for a leader – without it, everything we do is worthless. The whole letter of 1 Thessalonians oozes with love. Paul feels the searing pain (1 Thess. 2:17) of being forcibly separated as a parent from their small children (every parent's worst nightmare) or a child from the rest of his family (a small child's worst nightmare). In some of the strongest love language in all literature he shouts, 'Now we LIVE because we've heard you Thessalonians are okay – we're so joyful before God I can't even find enough words to express my thanks!' (1 Thess. 3:8-9). Paul was delighted to share his life with them (1 Thess. 2:8). He was happy to labour as a leather-worker so as to be no burden to them (1 Thess. 2:9). He is over the moon that they have been brought to life (1 Thess. 1:2-10; 2:13) and now he loves to encourage them with signs of grace that he sees in them (1:2-10; 2:13-14; 3:6; 4:9-10). Paul sincerely loves these people. So servant leadership is a double dynamic – pleasing God and loving people. But the two are inextricably linked. It is precisely because the servant leader is focused on pleasing God (playing to the audience of One) that he doesn't use people, either for money (1 Thess. 2:5) or for self-esteem (1 Thess. 2:6) and he is freed to genuinely love others gladly, deeply, sacrificially. And not only that, biblical servant leaders seek to please a God who is a God of love who defines love and commands love and has entrusted us with a gospel of the love-action of Christ crucified for sinners that he might bring more into the eternal love of the Trinity.

¹ See Dave Harvey, [The Plurality Principle](#) or listen to the discussion of the book on the [TGC podcast](#).

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4. The manner of leadership is: **Authority not asserted**. So easily we default to an Old Testament priest/prophet/king style of leadership. But Paul, even though an Apostle, says, 'We could have asserted our authority but instead we were like young children among you' (1 Thess. 2:6-7). Servant leaders are not 'above' those they are leading, [not domineering](#), but rather see themselves and present themselves as fellow 'little children' (cf. Matt. 18:3; 1 Pet. 5:3; Mark 10:42). The servant leader does not command as a dictator: "Do this because I say so." He has the fatherly-pastoral authority to rebuke, command and charge but wherever possible he seeks to avoid asserting that authority to compel obedience, preferring to address the flock as a brother in Christ (x 8 in 1 Thess.) and appeal (persuasively, passionately and rationally) for obedience and followership to be freely and gladly given (cf. Philemon 9-14; 2 Cor. 8:8).
5. Instead of dictatorship, servant leadership is exercised largely through three things: first **Personal Example**. Seven times in 1 Thess. 1-2 Paul says to the Thessalonians 'You remember' or 'You know how' or 'You witnessed' – each time referring to the conduct and ministry of himself and his co-workers when they were in Thessalonica (1:5; 2:1, 2, 5, 9, 10, 11). The whole of the first half of the letter is a reminder of the pattern of Christian holiness and hard work and then there is the hinge in the letter – 1 Thess. 4:1 – with the second half urging them to keep on copying the pattern of holiness and hard work they saw – 'imitators of us' (1 Thess. 1:6). We can be shy of this exemplary model but it is clearly biblical – 1 Tim 4:12 and Titus 2:7 – and hugely significant.
6. Secondly, servant leadership is exercised through **Fatherly Counsel**. This fatherly counsel clearly links strongly with the point about personal example – as any parent knows, modelling is a massively important part of parenting which can either halve or double the force of our speech. But speech is necessary. 'Like a father with his children we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worth of God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory' (1 Thess. 2:11). A great example of this kind of fatherly discourse is Proverbs 1-7 where the father pleads passionately with his son, 'Please son, don't go down that path, that is the way of death, fear the Lord, watch your heart son, whatever you do in life above all seek wisdom, get wisdom, sell all you have and cling to wisdom as if your life depends on it because it does'. This is discourse full of love and seriousness and tenderness and God-centred weightiness. That's what Paul does throughout 1 Thessalonians. And this is fatherly discourse full of the gospel (1 Thess. 2:11b) – the God who irresistibly calls people out of the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of his beloved son and even makes rebels into sons who will share in his glory. This is exhortation that [motivates people not with guilt/moralism or false promises but with the gospel](#), encouragement that comforts and strengthens people with the gospel hope (1 Thess. 4:18), admonishes and urges people to live up to what they already are by grace.
7. Thirdly, servant leadership is exercised through **Self-effacing Word ministry**. Here we find the engine-room and key task of leadership and ministry. Here we find the substance of the fatherly counsel. 'When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers (1 Thess. 2:13). That verse tells us a) the content of Paul's ministry – not personal anecdotes and experiences but the Word of God (cf. 2 Tim. 4:2; Acts 17:2); b) the authority at work in Paul's ministry – Paul is very glad the Thessalonians didn't receive his words as 'Pastor Paul's message for today' but rather received their invitation and warning and call and command and marching orders from God himself (cf. 1 Thess. 4:8) – the preacher is simply a courier, the real authority is the Word of God and the servant leader knows his is only ever a delegated authority exercised through the Word of God; c) the power at work in Paul's ministry – the word of God is a living agent at work in those who hear – so Paul knows he does not 'make things happen' by manipulative human persuasion or sparkling oratory or clever management techniques – hearts are changed as people are served/led by the divine power of the Word of God. The leader becomes almost invisible and the glory goes to the speaking God.
8. All this servant leadership has a very particular aim: it is ministry **directed towards increasing faith**. It is very striking the number of references to faith in 1 Thess. 3. Timothy's goal is to strengthen and encourage them in their faith (v2). The devil's great target is destroying faith and Paul is terribly worried that the evil one may have succeeded (v5). Paul is overjoyed to hear that their faith has stood firm (v6-7). He wants to supply what is lacking in their faith (v10). As Piper argues in *Future Grace*, faith is absolutely key to everything in the Christian life. It is faith that produces every good work

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(Heb. 11). It is faith that guards us and gets us home (1 Pet. 1:5). So the servant leader wants to work and pray with a clear aim: 'for your progress and joy in the faith' (Phil. 1:25). He wants to be an instrument of God strengthening hearts that they would be eagerly waiting, blameless and holy at the return of Christ (1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13).

9. A subsidiary but very important aim of the servant leader is: **Equipping the saints for the work of ministry** (Eph. 4:12). Long before the secular world started to talk about 'empowerment' and 'facilitation' and 'investing in people' God's plan was that the leaders of the church were equippers and encouragers and catalysts of the ministry of every member of the body. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians (all the saints not just the elders) to encourage one another (1 Thess. 5:11), to warn, help and be patient with sensitivity according to diagnosis (1 Thess. 5:14) and to do good to one another (1 Thess. 5:15). So the first half of Paul's letter becomes a template not only for pastoral ministry but also, to a large extent, a template for every member's ministry – encouraging, caring, warning, working hard to do good to one another.
10. In all this servant leaders are **God-reliant**. This is why Paul prays and thanks God so much through his letter (1 Thess. 1:2; 2:13; 3:9-13; 5:13, 28). Paul knows that it is only the Lord God who can change hearts and lives. He knows that the zeal of the Lord will accomplish His purposes, that He who has started a good work will bring it to completion, that the One who calls you is faithful and He will do it (1 Thess. 5:24). This doesn't make Paul apathetic, he wrestles in prayer and strains every sinew and pleads with people, but it does mean that he is able to be patient (that oft forgotten fruit of the Spirit) and not push too hard (cf. Phil. 3:15; 2 Tim. 2:25; 3:9).

Further resources:

Richard Coekin, [Servant-hearted Leadership](#) & [Leadership spectrum tool](#)

Paul Tripp, *Lead*

Marcus Honeysett, *Powerful Leaders*