

## RE-AWAKENING THE SELFLESS MODE OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP AMONG CHRISTIANS

**EGBUNU, FIDELIS ELEOJO (PhD)\***

*\*Department of Religious Studies, Kogi State University, Anyigba, Kogi State, Nigeria.*

*Phone Number: +2348068515750*

*E-Mail Address: [egbunu.fe@ksu.edu.ng](mailto:egbunu.fe@ksu.edu.ng)*

### ABSTRACT

*Re-awakening the selfless mode of Servant Leadership Among Christians remains a very crucial need in the present dispensation. This is owing to the rarity of such leaders not only in the secular world but perhaps also more surprisingly even in the Christian fold. Sociological, historical and descriptive methods were employed in searching into who such leaders are; the important scriptural underlying principles associated with them; Jesus as perfect example; what ought to be played out among contemporary Christians with its challenges and prospects. It is thus submitted that though selfless Servant Leadership is not without its challenges, the rewards are enormous. Longstanding virtues such as love, prudence, humility, commitment, mercy, prayerfulness, teamwork, among others, were highly extolled and showcased as inalienable qualities of such a Selfless Servant-Leader.*

**KEY TERMS:** *Selfless Mode, Servant Leadership, Re-awakening.*

### PREAMBLE

So much has been said or written on the issue of leadership that there is hardly any need to over-flog it. This topic could be approached from the point of view of Ideal Leadership; Effective Leadership; Impactful Leadership; Charismatic Leadership; Integral Leadership; Wise Leadership; Collaborative Leadership, Dynamic Leadership; Servant Leadership; and so forth. These perspectives offer suggestions on how to improve on our leadership styles from the local, the state to the national level. However, our focus is a little bit different because of the peculiar need of our generation.

There was this piercing point made in a 2007 interview Nelson Mandela fame of South Africa granted to one Dr. Hakeem Baba-Ahmed. His comments on Nigeria, for instance, would be the launch-pad to out entire reflection, thus:

*Your leaders have no respect for their people. They believe that their personal interests are the interests of the people. They take people's resources and turn it into personal wealth. There is a level of poverty in Nigeria that should be unacceptable. I can't understand why Nigerians are not more angry than they are (Odukoya 1).*

The above assertion actually belongs to a somewhat different context. Perhaps, of Nigerian politics and economy. However, the undergirding question stares everyone on the face – Could Nigerian Christian leaders at whatever level stand exonerated from this indictment on such self-serving tendencies? To what extent do some so-called Christian Leaders bring “Personal interest” into leadership while claiming to be men/women of God?

## DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

i. **Servant Leadership** – refers to the use of one's position in the society to work for the benefit or the good of others (cf. *Chambers 21<sup>st</sup> Century Dictionary*). The term “Servant” derives from the word “service”. To serve, according to *Oxford Advance Learners' Dictionary* means, to be useful to somebody in achieving an aim i.e. to work.

Many people mistakenly/erroneously identify service with servitude. Servitude is the condition of a slave or one being forced to obey another person. However, there are various categories of servants: **Domestic Servants** – Work in a household for wages e.g. housekeepers; **Public Servants** – Work for the public e.g. Police, Soldiers, Road Safety, etc.; **Civil Servants** – are government employees.

And we may hasten to add another special category: **God's servants** – who are in most cases volunteer workers without wages e.g. King David (Psalm 89:4) – the anointed servant of God. The Prophets were often referred to as “my servant”. There also existed Communal servants especially when God makes reference to “Israel my servant” (Isa. 4:8). This category (God's servants) are often chosen and gifted (anointed) or vice versa. St. Augustine of Hippo often refers to such servants as those who dispense God's gifts.

ii. **Christians** – Could simply be defined as those who practice the religion of Christianity. In other words, they are followers of Jesus of Nazareth. They go by the beliefs or tenets and practices especially as dictated in the Holy Scriptures and the teaching authority of the Church i.e. the apostolic tradition.

- iii. **Selfless Mode** – refers to the state of thinking more about the needs, happiness, comfort, welfare, security, peace, etc. of other people than one's own (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*). Humans are known to be innately selfish such that those who are yielded to and led by the spirit of God are expected to rise far and above ethereal cravings i.e. the difference must be noticed between that which is of God and that which is of the world.
- iv. **Re-awakening** – means making someone have a particular feeling once again or remembering something they have not thought about for a long time (*Macmillan English Dictionary*). In this light, it refers to rekindling of the fire or spirit of the virtue of selflessness in focus.

### WHO IS A LEADER AND WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

The *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary of English* defines a Leader as that which ranks first... a person who leads as a guide or one who has a commanding authority or influence. And the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of English*, on the other hand, describes a leader as a “person or thing that is the best”. This readily evokes the image of first among equals. He goes first and shows the way.

Leaders are also seen as “those who are selected from among others and are given a mandate to rule or be in charge of a group of people” (Nagba 4). How he comes up and what he does would eventually lead us to the types or styles of leadership. His responsibility entails basically knowing how to get people to work together where they are best suited.

From the above submissions, it would mean that leadership is the position or capacity of a leader. It is the art of influencing or directing people in order to gain their confidence, respect, cooperation or obedience so as to achieve a desired goal or targets.

In this connection, the power philosophies of Machiavelli the Prince, Thomas Hobbes and Friedrich Nietzsche, “may guide the behaviour of world's dictators, but they are grossly inconsistent with true ethical leadership and the Word of God” (Horton 53). There exists a clear dichotomy between God's idea of leadership and the world's idea. In other words, certain principles enunciated in Robert Greene's *48 Laws of Power*, for instance, can never be the ideal standard for Christian leadership. If the *48 Laws of Power* replaces the Bible principles, then evil genius and manipulations reign supreme. Then the end justifying the means becomes the rule rather than the exception, in which case, anything could be achieved by hook or crook.

In an ideal situation, “a leader is one whom others will follow willingly and voluntarily” i.e. Christian followership is about volunteerism. This rules out autocrats, tyrants, bullies and a lot more of others who apply coercion or force on others to recognise their powers and act as impostors. In this light, Kenneth Gangel succinctly opines that “leadership is not political power-play... leadership is not authoritarian attitude... leadership is not cultic control” (Cited in Horton 53).

Anthony D’Souza summarizes the idea of authentic leadership better,

Leadership is not so much the exercise of power itself as empowerment of others... leaders lead by pulling rather than pushing, by inspiring rather than ordering; by creating achievable, though challenging expectations and rewarding progress towards them rather than manipulating; by enabling people to use their own initiatives and experiences rather than by denying or constraining their experiences and actions... (35).

A true leader truly cares and treats people in humane manners.

It is pertinent at this juncture to briefly explain in passing a few of the different types of leadership.

## **TYPES OF LEADERSHIP**

Leadership is classified into different types, depending on the perspective or purpose for which such classification is undertaken. Some authors have classified it into Traditional, Charismatic and Classical. While the traditional is more of inheritance, Charismatic is through giftedness or admirable qualities, while the classical has to do with the formal which entails bureaucratic principles. Another author has divided it into Gentile/Christian or Kingdom leadership types (in which case the former is considered secular while the latter is said to be sacred). However, the researcher is more comfortable with Anthony Umoren’s (14) six sub-divisions, namely: Autocratic versus Participatory/Democratic; Task-oriented versus Relationship-oriented; Punishment-laden versus Reward-laden. However, for our purposes, the participative, relationship-oriented and the Reward-laden styles would be advocated.

## **IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP**

Good leadership plays a very pivotal role in the function of any organization. Kapena (6) outlines five of such functions:

- i. Giving Direction i.e. in establishing goals and objectives and proposing what should be done so as to achieve such objectives i.e. planning.
- ii. Getting Things Done – He/she leads the way in the actual execution or realization of what is desired e.g. Punctuality and good example.
- iii. Motivating and Inspiring – He/she ensures that the subordinates are sufficiently motivated or inspired to put their best in achieving the desired goals. This demands sustenance of the enthusiasm or interest without any form of coercion or intimidation e.g. by appreciation or reward.
- iv. Developing others and oneself – he/she ensures that the various talents are harnessed. Both his/her own and those of his subordinates are maximally utilized without any let or hindrance.
- v. Representation – He/she acts as the spokesperson or representative of his organization. And he takes responsibility for whatever takes place in the institution.

In a nutshell, as a good leader, he plans, organises, directs, coordinates and controls all that takes place thereby applying the what, how, where, who and why questions in every situation. In other words, he is required to seek out the required structure, guide and harmonize the interplay of activities as he monitors or evaluates to ensure right course or direction.

### **UNDERLYING SERVANT-LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES IN THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE**

The Bible is replete with various principles on Leadership. Both the Old Testament and New Testament give us concrete operations and examples of good leaders. And a good doze of leadership principles are derivable from the faces of the scripture.

The Old Testament personages who were called to be leaders include: Abraham (Gen. 17) – Father of many nations; Moses (Ex. 2) to lead the chosen; David (1 Sam. 16) anointed King of Israel. Others include Joshua, Gideon, Samuel, Solomon, Daniel, Nehemiah, etc.

And in the New Testament we meet Jesus – the ideal Leader or Leader *par excellence*. Good Shepherd (Jn. 10), Ransom for many (Mk. 10:42-45). Peter – Rock: Representative (Good spokesman – Acts 2). Paul – with his dynamism and relationality who remained the self-sacrificial, tenacious, vivacious, indefatigable, indomitable Apostles of the Gentiles (Acts 9). Timothy and Barnabas – were set apart (Acts 13:14ff).

When God needs to do anything in the history of mankind, He chooses human instruments, equips them and places them where He so desires.

## JESUS THE IDEAL SELFLESS SERVANT-LEADER

Jesus' style or pattern of leadership is generally tagged Servant Leadership. It is based on the sound leadership principles as enunciated in Mark 10:42-44. In this case,

No lording over (authoritarianism i.e. it is not by tyranny, terrorising, high-handedness or intimidation but by persuasion); no abusing of the authority entrusted unto them but by showing good example; no red-tapism or unnecessary bureaucracy; it is the function of creating an enabling environment, suitable or conducive climate; it is right combination of temperamental traits (sanguine, choleric, melancholic, phlegmatic, innate talents, skills, education, experience, vocation/calling, special gifts and diligence).

As Jesus trains future leaders in what Jean Vanier (9) refers to as *The Scandal of Service* (Jn. 13:12-17) – Jesus Washes Our Feet.

The episode is said to be so significant. It is practically a paraliturgical activity which ought to be imitated by all avowed Christian Leaders i.e. as He directed all followers to do as He had done. It was a shining example – a sort of beatitude.

In outlining the significance of the Washing of Feet, Vanier (39-72) enumerates seven basic points as he saw this singular act as: A symbol and a prophecy of life in the Kingdom; a communion of love with each person; forgiveness that gives life; exercising authority humbly as service (Jn. 10); where authority becomes communion; a going down to meet God in mankind (Phil. 2 – a *kenosis*: self-emptying); and a profound call to unity (Jn. 17:21) These disciples went through the kneading process (mentorship or apprenticeship with Jesus), were called and appointed as Fishers of men (Mk. 14:28). And it is apparent that this servanthood implies selflessness. In other words, the selfless mode at the nucleus of His teaching needs to be reactivated in every ideal Christian leader of our time. As it were, selflessness is already a given in servanthood. However, this selfless mode is being underlined for two basic reasons, for the sake of emphasis and for the fact that even corrupt political leaders who place self-interest before public interest have often applied “servant-leadership” as a catch-phrase to deceive the populace.

In this light, God's ideal of Christian leadership entails these basic points, thus: Leadership as service – washing of feet (Jn. 13:15). e.g. Moses is called “my servant” – not Moses, my leader; Leadership by God's choice – not by human selection – with all the politicking, lobbying, campaigning, bribe and rigging. We are called upon to

allow God to be God; suffering with the Master – whether one is able and ready to drink the cup. It is not just a question of desiring the associated paraphernalia or titles but aiming at the authentic mode.

### IN SEARCH OF AUTHENTIC SELFLESS MODE OF SERVANT LEADERS

The selfless mode of servant leadership seems to be a very scarce component among us Christians (Isaiah 42:1-5) The spirit of selfless servant leadership is embedded in the above scriptural passage.

Verse 1, for instance, shows a servant who is dependent on God in faith – Here, it is not just belief in articles of the faith such as virgin birth, Trinity, Eucharist, etc. It means expectant faith that God will do what He says; as servant who is the chosen one through the outpouring of spirit – by Baptism which he/she is adopted as a child of God and heir of the Kingdom; he/she becomes God’s soul delight – Jesus is called the Beloved with whom God is so pleased, just as David is referred to as one after God’s heart; he/she gives fair judgement in which case he is considered just, transparent and full of integrity.

Verse 2 shows he/she does not raise his/her voice and is not after showmanship. Not a rabble-rouser or noisemaker. Not self opinionated. No adulation. No self-advertisement and no fanfare; that such a leader would not break the crushed reed or snuff the faltering wick shows how modest, humble and meek he/she is. In this case, he/she does not intimidate his/her subjects.

Verse 3 shows he/she is considerate and full of empathy – e.g. the *48 Laws of Power* says not even the ashes of their enemies should remain. And that they should effect total annihilation (as if putting other people’s candles off will light theirs) has no space here.

Verse 4 shows how optimistic a Christian leader ought to be. He/she is a dealer in hope (Napoleon Bonaparte). Never says quit and never discouraged. Is ever indefatigable, indomitable and never grows faint; he/she establishes fair judgement since he/she is a goal-getter, goal achiever and undeterred, goes through thick and thin and never afraid of contrary winds.

Verse 5 – coasts and islands remain steadfast waiting for the judgment of such a leader as he/she wills his/her influence and remains every trustworthy.



The God who calls one to leadership is the God who turns weaknesses into strength.

He saw Abraham, an old man and discovered father of the faithful;

He saw Moses, a stammerer and discovered a liberator;

He saw Joseph, a slave and discovered a prime minister;

He saw David, the youngest among Jesse's Children and discovered a king.

Indeed, selflessness in all its trajectories entails a good deal of salutary elements: it is characterized by Agapeic Love (1Cor. 13). The prevalent attitude of my-ownism (my own first). My interest must be served/protected first and foremost, has no place here. No fund-raising by hook and crook. Transparency is the watchword. Inferiority or superiority complex is out of this equation. It is neither jealous, boastful nor proud. No power tussle or unhealthy rivalry here. No I-too-know (ITK) or perpetuating of tenure by hook or crook (no tenure elongation). Cooperates in all that is noble. The spirit of dialogue and negotiation reigns supreme; Accessibility, approachability or availability remain paramount. Fairness, justice, mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, meekness, devotedness, understanding and empathy are its hallmarks. Inclusiveness, collaboration, collective efforts are its ideals (women, youth, elderly, foreigners are given their due attention). It has no room for telling lies, deceit, doublespeak, hide-and-seek and unforgiveness. It does not give flimsy excuses so as to dodge responsibilities. The idea of son-of-the-soil syndrome belongs to the waste bin. It rather promotes the spirit of teamwork (1Cor. 1:10-13, 17). It carries or pulls others along, elicits useful suggestions and gives credits to whom it is due (in which case, no one is gifted enough to run the Ministry alone). It lights candles instead of cursing darkness. Its prudence, discipline, diligence, perseverance, co-responsibility, solidarity, harmony, patience, peace, hardwork and other glowing virtues have no match.

In other words, such leaders are the salt of the earth and the light of not only the group they lead but those they encounter daily. Their lives are the living Gospel, being preached every split second. What we have here is foot-washing agenda writ-large, a God and people-centered Ministry devoid of boot-licking, sycophancy, hypocrisy or pharisaism.

But not without challenges. For even Moses went through fatigue till the father-in-law, Jethro offered a most useful counsel on the need for collaboration (Exod. 18). Not without Criticisms. Hard decisions that would benefit the subjects on the long-run would have to be taken. Certain inalienable requirements are hereby brought into focus.



## LEADERSHIP IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

For an effective, selfless servant leadership, certain things are required:

The leader has to be called and consecrated/commissioned for the assignment e.g. in Acts 13:14 the Holy Spirit wanted Paul and Barnabas to be set apart. The blind cannot lead the blind (Luke 6:39). It is also very risky to appoint oneself.

Leadership is not by age or politiking in a particular Church, region, diocese, nation, etc. It is neither by how intellectually endowed nor number of degrees; it is not by how knowledgeable or smartness in the arts, humanities and sciences; it is not by how financially buoyant/materially wealthy; it is not by how powerfully connected/or popular; and it may not be by how one possesses the extraordinary gifts e.g. administration, stewardship, healing, miracles, prophecy, etc.

The essential components are displayed in Acts 6:3 – to be authentically selected “among the brethren and not a stranger”; to be men/women of “good repute”; to be “filled with the spirit of wisdom” for vision, mission and discernment; to be trustworthy or reliable (and must also beware of handing over to “Judas Iscariot”).

In which case, “an ideal leader” according to Bishop Bagobiri (20) in the Christian community is a facilitator/catalyst with the reviviscence of charismatic gifts akin to that of the early Church.

God shares these gifts as He wills (1 Cor. 12:7,11). This enables them to be good stewards of His varied graces (1 Pet. 4:10) in order to build up the entire body (Eph. 4:16). Each charism is given for three main reasons: Personal holiness, Unity of the body, Evangelization.

## RE-AWAKENING SELFLESSNESS MODE

The selfless-servant leader must live by self-example. Obiefuna (9) points out six pertinent virtues that such Christian leaders must possess, namely: Charity, devotedness, prudence, meekness, humility and mercy.

In showing personal example, for instance, Eims (92) suggests that “if leaders spot a need” they should readily “roll up their sleeves, step in, and do whatever they can, then their followers will be motivated to join in as well”.

There are several dimensions of leadership qualities that need serious re-awakening. This would be presented in seven major questions:

i. How Loving/Charitable?

How charitable is such a leader with his/her time, treasure, and talents? Is he/she punctual enough? Does he/she possess enough love for his members (1 Cor. 13:1-7). How relational is he/she i.e. in his/her Apostolate of presence, how available, approachable and edifying?

ii. How Prudent?

Truth is the function of forthrightness, honesty, accountability and transparency. If truth is banished from all the earth, let it be found in the hearts of princes. Whoever heeds corrections shows prudence (Prov. 15:5). He/she who listens to advice and accept instruction will be wise at the end (Prov. 11:20). Obedience is better than sacrifice (1 Kings 15:28). Jesus' meat is to do the Father's will (John 4:34).

iii. How Humble?

Humility should not be misconstrued for leaving oneself as a doormat (2 Cor. 4:7). That we have these treasures in jars of clay shows that we are nothing (Prov. 62:2). Power belongs to the Lord (Prov. 15:33). Humility comes before honour (1Cor. 4:7). The all-encompassing power is from God and not us. Saint Augustine of Hippo declares that the three qualifications for holiness are: (1) Humility (2) Humility (3) Humility. And the New Testament harps on these basic facts: Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth (Mt. 5:3); a humble individual thinks first of the wellbeing of others (Mt. 11:29).

iv. How Devoted/Committed?

Whoever remains in me bears fruit in plenty (Jn. 15:4-5); such a person cannot afford to remain non-challant about spiritual realities and cannot serve two masters (Matt. 6). Devotion is the function of faith and faith is the foundation of Christian leadership. This is about commitment to God and the flock. How loaded a leader is for action? How passionate or tenacious a leader for lost souls? (Matt. 16:24). How ready is he/she to lay down his/her life? (John 10). Does he/she resemble the Master in *Kenosis* or self-emptying? Christian leadership costs not less than everything.

v. How Merciful?

Jesus in Luke 7:16 – was so merciful to Mary Magdalene. In John 8:3-11 – the other woman.

vi. How Prayerful?

Without prayer, there is no vision (power or connectedness to the source of power). Jesus always sought the will of the father (Luke 6:12-13) especially at the beginning of His ministry. Even in the choice of the

twelve (Luke 11:27) and in the prayer he taught his disciples. It is only with God all things are possible (Mark 10:27).

vii. How Consultative?

Another test of a good Christian leader is to ask what he/she does with past leaders. Does he/she consult them or discard them? He/she who listens to advice and accepts instruction will at the end be wise (Prov. 29:20). Need to meet experienced leaders for counsel.

### CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH SELFLESS SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

The challenges associated with selfless servant-leadership are enormous. It is noteworthy that once one becomes a leader, everything about the person makes news e.g. hairstyle, drink, food, shoes, tie, trousers, car and how you drive or sit, makeup, nail, lipsticks, earring, perfume you wear, scarf, hat. It is therefore pertinent to beware of inordinate relationships i.e. undue attachment to wealthy men/women in society; since the life of such a leader is no longer his/hers in totality, the person would no longer be able to say, leave me alone! He/she remains a public figure; challenges arise left, right and centre; the leader's reactions, actions and inactions in relation to criticisms shows one's maturity; due to loneliness, there will be temptations to "turn stones into bread". There shall be time constraints and periods of fatigue. Yet, he/she must be decisive, admit mistakes and remain focused and hardworking. For the only place where success comes before hardwork is in the dictionary.

Ukpai (9-12) seemed to have made a good summary of it all when he listed nine biblical principles of leadership:

The foundation of leadership is character

The nature of leadership is service (Mark 10:45)

The motive of leadership is love

The measure of leadership is sacrifice (Jn. 10:11)

The glory of the Lord is the purpose (1Cor. 10:31)

The tool of leadership is the Word of God and prayer

The privilege of leadership is Growth

The Holy Spirit is the equipper

The Model of leadership is Jesus Christ.

But such challenges are not without great rewards

In certain quarters, the yardstick for success in their leadership is to ask “what gain?” And when it does not put food on their table, it is all considered a trash or waste of resources and time. But it is pertinent at this juncture to bear in mind that, there are rich rewards for the selfless servant leaders; humility comes before honour (Prov. 15:33); seeking the Kingdom of God and its righteousness adds increase (Matt. 6:33); being friends of Jesus makes one reign with Him (John 15:19; Matt. 25; Luke 22:28-29), makes one bear fruit in plenty (John 15); will crown one with life (Rev. 2:10); would bring more anointing (II Kings 2:9); would bring forth the comforter (John 11:12); would bring eternal nourishment (Prov. 27:18); there shall be rich rewards unto eternal inheritance (Col. 3:24; 1 Cor. 4:1-5)

## CONCLUSION

There is an urgent need for a resurgence. The Church, nay Christian leaders need a new generation of selfless servant leaders. In this light, there is a basic need for soul-searching and high discernment. As one joins the train of leadership, being called and missioned at any level – be it national, provincial, diocesan, regional, deanery, parish/chaplaincy, the focus of selfless servant-leadership ought to be the guiding star or compass.

The Holy Spirit, the principal source of the mission must be the guide, to preside – not just to reside over one’s life and responsibilities; to allow his pivotal role be displayed over one’s life so as to get full vigour and effervescence since he is the sole change agent and best friend who equips one to equip others. The truth remains, *nemo dat quod non habet* (no one can give what he/she does not have).

We must learn to change our steps/leadership styles. To follow the footsteps of our father in the faith. To be as:

Christian leaders of our generation must be ready to learning from Biblical personages of both the Old and New Testaments that we cannot afford to be: As disobedient as Adam and Eve and yet be selfless servant leaders; as jealous and vindictive as Cain and still be selfless servant leaders; as tricky as Jacob and yet be claiming to be selfless servant-leaders; as obstinate, hardhearted and stubborn as Pharaoh and yet be; as self-opinionated and cocky, arrogant and wicked as Nebuchadnezzar and yet be; as immoral as Samson and Delilah and yet be; as wicked and full of evil machinations like Haman and yet be; as covetous as Ahab and yet be; as fraudulent and greedy as Jezebel and yet be; as avaricious and deceptive as Ananias and Saphira and yet be; as betraying as Judas and yet be claiming to be selfless servant-leaders.

We are called upon to endeavour to learn or imbibe certain virtues such as the faithfulness of Pa Abraham, the courage of King David, the wisdom and discernment of Solomon, the determination and focus of Joshua and the dynamism of Paul.

While not in any guise trying to propose a one-size-fits-all kind of leadership style, it is pertinent to note that the need for Christian leaders to have a thorough introspection cannot be overemphasized. This would lead to proper transformation, improvement or total reorientation of the individual leadership styles which appropriately reflect the ideals of the Christian faith.

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