

Son, Sent, and Servant

Johannine Perspectives on Servant Leadership Theory

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Abstract

This study challenges the claim that Jesus is the archetypical servant leader as described in contemporary leadership literature. Based on a theological reading of the Fourth Gospel, the paper suggests that, as a servant, Jesus cannot be understood apart from his mission and obedience to God. Consequently, Jesus was not primarily a servant leader but rather the Son who was sent to the world to enact the Father's will. In this regard, the Fourth Gospel provides a unique perspective that is barely noted in the current discourse on servant leadership modelled on the example of Christ. Although certain aspects of servant leadership theory correspond to John's portrayal of Jesus, the study concludes that other descriptions of him as a servant leader suffer from a one-sided and reductionist Christology. Implications of this view for Christian ministry are briefly sketched out.

Introduction

Jesus' statement "I am among you as the one who serves" (Luke 22:27)¹ has made scholars and practitioners point to Jesus Christ as the forefather of servant leadership. Although this article confirms Jesus as a prime example of both serving and leading, it evaluates and criticizes the belief that Jesus was a servant leader in the meaning of the term found in much contemporary literature. In this regard, the Fourth Gospel provides a unique perspective that is barely noted in the current debate on servant leadership modelled on the example of Christ.² A tentative thesis at the outset of the study is that, as a servant, Jesus cannot be understood apart from his mission and obedience to God. Jesus was not first and foremost a servant leader but rather the Son who was sent to the world to do the Father's will. If this thesis is true, then it has implications for the portrayal of Jesus as the prototypical servant leader. To explore this thesis more fully, two questions guide a theological reading of the Gospel of John. First, is Jesus described as a servant leader in the Fourth Gospel? Second, in what ways does the Johannine portrayal of Jesus align with and/or differ from perceptions of Jesus as the prototypical servant leader in contemporary leadership theories? To answer these questions, I briefly review the claims suggesting that Jesus is a servant leader before I evaluate them from a Johannine perspective. Finally, I sketch out some implications of the study for the Christian community.

¹ All references to NASB.

² I take no side in the discussions concerning Johannine authorship in this paper. Hence, terms such as "John/Johannine" and "Fourth Gospel/fourth evangelist" are used interchangeably.

Jesus as servant leader

The contemporary interest in servant leadership can be traced back to the writings of Robert Greenleaf (2002), who coined the phrase in 1970s. With Greenleaf's ideas as a starting point, a myriad of concepts and constructs have emerged. Despite – or perhaps because of – this variety, there remains no consensus on what constitutes servant leadership (Dierendonck, 2011). Nonetheless, servant leadership has been widely accepted and applied, and it is perhaps the most influential leadership model within the Christian community (Wong & Davey, 2007). This influence is evident from the numerous publications on Christian leadership that focus on servant leadership (e.g., Ebener, 2010; Ford, 1991; Marshall, 2003), even to the point that this approach has come to mean to “lead like Jesus” (Blanchard & Hodges, 2005). Although also practiced and embraced in the secular world of the corporation, Greenleaf's philosophy is “unabashedly spiritual” (Lee & Zemke, 1993, p. 22) and should be understood as part of the wider turn to spirituality in current leadership research (Bekker, 2010). Greenleaf himself has made references to Christ as a leader in his writings, and it is acknowledged that his Quaker affiliation has affected his orientation (Banks & Ledbetter, 2004; Frick, 2004).³ Thus, his ideas are best described as a marginal counter-spirituality that offers an alternative vision for individual and organizational identity (Bekker, 2010). The scholarly literature on servant leadership also points to Christ as the conceptual ancestor of the current discourse (Hannay, 2009). In an article exploring the philosophical basis of servant leadership, Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) even suggest that it was Jesus, not Greenleaf, who first introduced the concept of servant leadership. Although not entirely without its critics (Bradley, 1999; Maciariello, 2003; Niewold, 2007), many Christian leadership scholars argue that Greenleaf's principles of servant leadership correspond to biblical concepts (Flaniken, 2006) and that Jesus embodies the true and perfect example of servant leadership (Chung, 2011). I believe that the Fourth Gospel provides a more nuanced portrait of Jesus' leadership than those prevalent today, and I discuss Jesus as servant in light of two central motifs in John, specifically Jesus as Son (of the Father) and Jesus as sent (from the Father). Although these motifs are intertwined in the Gospel of John, I discuss them separately before I synthesize the findings in a comment on servant leadership from a Johannine perspective.

Son, sent, and servant in the fourth gospel

Son

Even a surface reading of the Fourth Gospel reveals the frequency of references to the Father/Son relationship. Thompson (1999) notes that “Father” is the most common designation of God in John's Gospel and that the term is used approximately 120 times, more than in all the other gospels combined. Some commentators understand this kinship language to ascribe divinity to Jesus, with the portrayal of the Father and Son as having the same essence and

³ Frick contends that Greenleaf's ideas also were informed by Methodist impulses (pp. 41–46).

nature (Cowan, 2006). John repeatedly refers to Jesus being with the Father (3:2; 8:28, 38; 16:32), a position he had before creation (17:5). Thus, although the Son is distinguished from the Father, the Gospel affirms Jesus' divinity (1:1, 18; 8:58; 20:28). The uniqueness of Christ is also evident in the relationship between the Father and Jesus' disciples: Although they are included in the Father-language (20:17), the evangelist maintains the distinction between their relationship and Jesus' relationship to God because Jesus is the one and only (*monogenēs*) Son of God (1:14; 3:16-17, cf. 3:35-36; 5:19-26; 6:40; 8:35-36).

However, there are instances in which the evangelist clearly distinguishes the Son from the Father (e.g., 14:28), and this fact has been used as an argument against the deity of Jesus (Keener, 2003). However, a more convincing claim is that the difference between the Father and the Son – in addition to the seemingly asymmetrical relationship between them in John – should be understood in light of Jesus' mission and the modes in which it is fulfilled. Köstenberger (1998) advocates a number of interrelated but distinct sub-portrayals of Jesus in John, each with certain terms that denote the modes of movement in Jesus' mission combined with certain characterizations of Jesus as: (a) the sent Son; (b) the One who comes into the world and returns to the Father, including the descent-ascent motif; and (c) the eschatological shepherd-teacher. Further, he notes that the different terminologies concerning Jesus that are used are related to the different roles that he has in the Johannine corpus. For instance, the term "sent" is used only in connection with "Son" and never directly when Jesus' incarnation or divinity is at stake. Köstenberger concludes that the sending-language belongs to the "human" side of Jesus' mission, that is, the aspects that rest on obedience and dependence on the sender. Similarly, Cowan (2006) makes a case for the subordination of the Son to the Father in the Fourth Gospel. He offers three arguments for his thesis: (a) the Father's sending of the Son; (b) the Son's obedience to and dependence on the Father; and (c) and the very use of Father-Son language to describe the relationship between them.

Rather than reducing Jesus to fit one Christological model in John, then, it is better to allow for the tension and interplay between Jesus in intimate unity with the Father and Jesus as sent from the Father. What, for us, seems to be a riddle to be solved is, for John's Jesus, a paradox to be embraced. He who states, "I and the Father are one" (10:30), also proclaims, "the Father is greater than I" (14:28). Thus, the different descriptions of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel vary in function rather than in essence. The emphasis on the divinity, pre-existence, and sovereignty of Jesus must be maintained while not denying that the same Jesus is functionally subordinate to God – "one need not, indeed must not choose between the two, if evidence for both exists within the text" (Köstenberger, 1998, p. 135). Notably, the Gospel that most highlights Jesus' deity also emphasizes the subordination of Jesus to the Father more than the other evangelists. Although John's Christology is incarnational, it is also a "sending" Christology. It is the latter perspective that emphasizes the subordinationist aspects of the Fourth Gospel and to this perspective we now turn.

Sent

Numerous authors depict the Jewish concept of agency (*shaliach*) as a probable background for the sending-language in John (Köstenberger, 1998). Central to this institution is the authority to perform the work or the business of another, even to the point that "a man's agent is

as himself” (Friend, 1990, p. 20). It follows that the agent is not to promote his own agenda but rather to act according to the will of the sender.⁴ This idea is apparent in Jesus’ understanding of his mission, explaining why “the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner” (5:19). The notion of agency corresponds well to several statements in the Fourth Gospel that describe the relationship between the Father and the Son (5:23; 12:44-45; 13:20; 14:9; 15:23). However, the Johannine Jesus is not only an agent but also the only begotten Son. Thus, the sent Son acts on behalf of the sender (the Father) while also sharing his nature and being: “If the agent is as the one who sent him, how much more would the son of the household be as the father who sent him” (Friend, p. 21, cf. 10:30, 38; 14:10; 17:21). It is noteworthy that, of the 41 times the expression “to send” is used in the Fourth Gospel, the majority are associated with Jesus as Son or with his relationship to the (sending) Father (Friend, 1990). Thus, Thompson (1999) is correct to note that references to Jesus as “sent” mainly belong to the Father terminology in the Fourth Gospel. This proximity between the Father/Son-language and the sending motif leads Anderson (1999) to ask whether the Father in John does anything in addition to sending the Son. His answer is no. According to Anderson, the best description of God in the Fourth Gospel is thus “the having-sent-me-Father” because the totality of the Gospel is encapsulated in the notion that the Father sends the Son because he loves the world (3:16-17,34; 4:34; 5:23-24,30,36-38; 6:29,37-40,44,57; 7:16-18,28-29,33; 8:16-18,26,28-29,42; 9:4; 10:36; 11:42; 12:44-45,49-50; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3,8,18,21-25; 20:21). It follows that the notion of sending is important not only for a proper understanding of the Johannine Jesus but also for the presentation of God as Father: “No fewer than twenty-five times in John, God is defined not in terms of ontic aspects of being but by active aspects of doing, the most important of which is launching the mission of the Son” (Anderson, 1999, p. 35). As such, the sending motif is crucial to Johannine theology and to the evangelist’s Christology, and the most important attribute of the Father in John is arguably his sending of the Son. Similarly, Jesus’ awareness of being sent is the most central aspect of his mission. Thus, the Christocentric revelation of the Father and the theocentric mission of the Son intervene in the Father/Son relationship in John (Anderson, 1999), emphasizing the interdependence of the Father/Son terminology and the sending/agency motif in the Fourth Gospel.

Witherington (1995) advocates the prominence of the language of agency in Johannine Christology and contends that the fourth evangelist uses such language to explain how Jesus can be simultaneously both equal to the Father in power and authority and subordinate in undertaking his mission and ministry. The paradoxical relationship of equality and subordination between Jesus and the Father here finds a state of equilibrium because the agent is similar to the one who sends him. To respond to the agent is to respond to the sender (5:23; 12:44-45; 13:20; 14:9; 15:23). To summarize the argument thus far, Jesus’ mission in the Fourth Gospel can only be appreciated within the greater context of the Father’s sending of the Son to do his will. The question remains as to whether Jesus as a servant leader fits within this framework. To address this issue, we turn to John 13, a pericope frequently approached as a prime exam-

⁴ I use the masculine personal pronoun because senders and agents were most likely males. Further, the rabbinic language that describes the *shaliach* typically used masculine nouns and pronouns. See Baker (2013, n. 22).

ple of Jesus's status as the prototypical servant leader (Kanagaraj, 2004; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002).

Servant

Although the Fatherhood of God and the sending of the Son are central and interconnected motifs in the Gospel of John, Coloe (2004) is correct to assert that the Fourth Gospel does not present Jesus as the Servant of God in the same manner as the Synoptics do.⁵ With only a few direct references to serving in the Gospel, one might be tempted to say that one should confer with the other evangelists when serving is the topic under study. The implication is not that the Johannine corpus is silent on the matter. On the contrary, the foot washing scene in the Fourth Gospel (13:1-20) arguably provides the strongest example of service in the gospel accounts. Briefly paraphrased, Jesus rises from the last supper and begins to wash his disciples' feet. This controversial act initiates a discussion between Jesus and Peter on the need for cleansing and culminates in Jesus instructing his disciples to follow his example:

Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. (13:12-17)

For Greenleaf, this foot washing scene is one source of the idea of servant leadership (Frick, 2004). Similarly, Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) contend that this story represents the ultimate example of what servant leadership means in praxis: "The unusual twist of Jesus' leadership through the feet washing example has redefined the meaning and purpose of leadership power from 'power over' to 'power to', that is power as an enabling factor to choose to serve others" (p. 59). Although this conclusion undoubtedly has its merits, the position that John 13 describes Jesus as a servant leader is not without opposition. To several theologians, it is not at all evident that service is the main topic of the pericope.⁶ Instead, foot washing is perceived as an invitation into the household of God (Coloe, 2004) or as an initiation rite to which the disciples must be submitted to enter into a new religious condition (Destro & Pesce-Bologna, 2010). A more widely held position suggests a sacramental interpretation of the pericope, viewing the foot washing in terms of a baptism and/or the Lord's Supper.⁷ As is increasingly recognized by contemporary commentators, however, a sacramental understanding of the foot

⁵ The servant motif in the Synoptic Gospels has been frequently discussed – in light of both the servant passages in Isaiah (e.g., James L Price, "The Servant Motif in the Synoptic Gospels: A New Appraisal," *Interpretation* 12, no. 1 (1958): 28–38) and the paradoxical relationship between servanthood and authority in the sayings of Jesus (see Narry Fajardo Santos, "The Paradox of Authority and Servanthood in the Gospel of Mark," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (1997): 452–60). I have not included any lengthy discussion on servant leadership in the Synoptics here because the prime interest of this paper is to evaluate and criticize contemporary servant leadership theory from a Johannine perspective, not to compare John and the Synoptics on servanthood.

⁶ For a survey and discussion of the most common interpretations of the foot washing, see Thomas (1990). The interpretations noted in the corpus of the present article are by no means exhaustive but serve as a backdrop for the current discussion on the meaning on servanthood in the Fourth Gospel.

⁷ See Beasley-Murray (1999, pp. 234-235) for a discussion of this position.

washing must be rejected and replaced by a Christological and soteriological reading of this passage (Beasley-Murray, 1999; Carson, 1991; Witherington, 1995). In this line of thought, the foot washing is understood as a symbolic action that points to the meaning of Jesus' death (Beasley-Murray, 1999; Culpepper, 1991; Witherington, 1995). Thus, to follow Jesus' example (*hypodeigma*, v. 15) is to embrace his death as a model for the persecuted Johannine community facing the threat of death (Culpepper, 1991).

However, this is not the only ramification of Jesus' example because the symbol itself has implications for Christian living and leadership. The washing of an inferior's feet by a superior was unheard of and nowhere attested to in other Jewish or Greco-Roman sources (Köstenberger, 2004; Thomas, 1990). Regardless of any deeper meaning of 13:7-10, then, the fact remains that Jesus displays the attitude and behaviors of a servant, and it feels somewhat contrived that his imperative to follow his example (vv. 15-17) should not refer to servanthood at all. As Thomas states, "whatever else may be in view in John 13:1-20, Jesus's identification with the servant's role is prominent" (p. 70). A closer examination of the evangelist's stunning description of the actual foot washing (vv. 4-5) seems to support such a claim. Keener (2003) notes that Jesus' posture is significant in this regard, given that the couches in first-century homes were arranged in such a way that people's feet pointed away from the center of the banquet. Thus, the spatial dimension underlines the humble attitude of Jesus when he begins to wash his follower's feet at the periphery rather than at the center. The reference to the towel Jesus ties around his waist (v. 4) carries the same connotation because it positions Jesus in the role of a slave (Beasley-Murray, 1999; Destro & Pesce-Bologna, 2010). Because the washing of another's feet symbolized the subjugation of one person to another in the first century, those who received foot washing were the social superiors of those who performed the task (Thomas, 1990). It was commonplace in first-century Palestine for followers to be the servants of the rabbi (Keener, 2003), and Jesus' disciples are portrayed as servants of him (15:20) and of God (12:26). However, when Jesus takes on the role of a slave, he radically inverts the conventional roles of masters and disciples in his society. Given this background, we may appreciate Peter's question, "Do you wash my feet?" (v. 6). De Silva (2004) suggests that Peter's refusal stems from a misunderstanding of Jesus' leadership model because foot washing was considered too low even for Jewish slaves (Beasley-Murray, 1999). In a commentary on 13:16, however, Morris (1995) views Jesus' humble actions as programmatic for his disciples: "If their Master and Sender does lowly actions, then they, the slaves and the sent ones, should not consider menial tasks beneath their dignity" (p. 552). Thus, the "example" (v. 15) that Jesus' disciples should follow is an invitation to mutual service (Kanagaraj, 2004). Carson (1991) contends that Jesus' act of humility is at once a demonstration of love (v. 1), a symbol of salvific cleansing (vv. 6-9), and a model of Christian conduct (vv. 12-17). Rather than viewing the foot washing as either a symbol of Jesus' death or an example of servanthood, the better approach is to avoid the dichotomy and accept that the section explains both the salvific necessity of being washed by Jesus (vv. 6-11) and how the foot washing works as a model for his disciples to serve each other (vv. 12-20). Bruner (2012) suggests that the foot washing scene reveals both what God has done for us in Christ and how his followers can live blessed lives (v. 17) in mutual service, forgiveness, and patience. As such, the pericope repre-

sents a demonstration of both theology (our relationship with God) and ethics (our relationship with each other).

It is significant for the present argument that, in the introductory clauses of the pericope (13:1-3), the evangelist connects humble service with the two major motifs discussed above, that is, agency and the Father/Son relationship. It was with the assurance “that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God” (v. 3) that he “got up from supper, and laid aside His garments” (v. 4) and performed his unthinkable act of humility and service. The scene is bound up with an allusion to the sending theme (v. 20), thus concluding the introduction by placing the foot washing firmly within the mission of Jesus. Because the one who is sent is subordinate to the one who sends him (v. 16), the role of the servant, which is intrinsic to Jesus’ mission, cannot be regarded as foreign to the mission of his followers (Michaels, 2011). This leads us to sketch out some consequences of the present study for servant leadership theory.

Towards a Johannine understanding of servant leadership

With regard to the first question guiding this study, asking whether the fourth evangelist portrays Jesus as a servant leader, the previous section has clarified that Jesus is indeed depicted as a servant in the Johannine corpus. A master taking the role of a slave is a radical redefinition of all relationships that involve power and influence, and therefore, the findings above have implications for leadership. Consequently, it is appropriate to conclude from the discussion and the context of the Johannine community that Jesus’ words and deeds promote a certain type of leadership (Kanagaraj, 2004). His emphasis on humility and servanthood marks a break from the traditional hierarchy of his day and completely inverts the understanding of what it means to be in charge (Wheatley, 2011). DeSilva (2004) argues that John ties each aspect of the communal *ethos* to Jesus’ example, especially as it relates to servanthood. When Jesus takes on the role of a domestic slave in John 13, he is thus providing an example of how his disciples are to serve each other. In this respect, servant leadership theorists who trace the construct back to Christ are certainly correct in their assertion that Jesus modelled a way of leading that ran contrary to the conventional leadership of his own time. This notion corresponds to the inversion of power and the paradoxical turn in status that is central to Greenleaf’s (2002) conceptualization of servant leadership:

The Servant leader is servant first. (. . .) It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. (. . .) The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant – first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. (p. 27)

In line with Greenleaf and many writers on servant leadership, Sendjaya and Sarros (2002) hold that altruism and the motivation to serve first are what distinguish servant leaders from other people in charge. Thus, servant leadership is not only about performing acts of service but about being a servant, about giving up control rather than seeking it (Northouse, 2013). Sendjaya and Sarros underline that such a posture is not a result of low self-esteem but rather a deliberate choice to put others first, based on a secure self-concept. Patterson (2003) argues

in a similar vein and suggests that the primary focus of servant leadership theory is that the leader serves the followers individually. Because service to others is the prime goal and the essence of such leadership, the construct differs from many other theories in that it places the benefit to the followers over the interests of the organization (Yukl, 2013). As such, Sendjaya and Sarros highlight Jesus as an example of such a leader, with reference to his self-emptying in making himself a servant (Phil 2:3-8).

Although it is clear that Jesus acted as a servant as part of his mission in obeying the Father, it is too early to conclude that he may easily fit the descriptions of the archetypical leader provided by contemporary servant leadership constructs. The thesis proposed in the present work suggests that the notion of serving cannot be separated from the more important motifs of agency and the Father/Son relationship. These aspects come into prominence when addressing the second question asked in this study – in what ways does the Johannine portrayal of Jesus align with and/or differ from perceptions of Jesus as the prototypical servant leader in contemporary leadership theories? To answer the question, the remainder of this section summarizes the arguments presented thus far in some points that show how a Johannine understanding of service and leadership may contribute to a richer and sometimes contrasting understanding of servant leadership.

The first point addresses the motivation for service. Greenleaf (2002) assumes that servant leadership “begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first” (p. 27). As good as it sounds, this assumption arguably builds on an overly optimistic anthropology that largely neglects the biblical notion of sin. The devastating effects of lust, pride, and selfishness evident in the world call into question the notion that a feeling to serve is natural. On the contrary, Russell (2003) admits that servant leadership contradicts the selfishness of human nature and is neither easy nor natural. In the Gospel of John, Jesus’ motivation to serve cannot be understood apart from his relationship to the Father and the interconnected theme of being sent: “For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment as to what to say and what to speak” (12:49, cf. 5: 30; 10:18; 14:10).⁸ Thus, whereas Greenleaf finds the calling to serve in the longing of the human spirit (Ferch, 2011), the Johannine account clearly ties Jesus’ service to the divine initiative.

In an attempt to portray Nehemiah as a servant leader, Maciariello (2003) claims that the abundant servant leadership literature that developed following Greenleaf has stripped “the biblical model of leadership” (author’s term) from its Scriptural roots and the larger narrative in which it belongs, thus ignoring important aspects such as the cross, God’s glory, and redemption. Although I am not completely convinced by Maciariello’s broader analysis, this point is a valid observation indeed. From a Johannine perspective, it is impossible to draw some general leadership principles from the life of Christ unless one is willing to observe all he says and does in relation to his self-understanding as God’s sent son. The critique raised against servant leadership as a general application of the servant leadership sayings of Jesus thus holds true: it is not possible for people to model themselves after Christ’s humility without being called by him and transformed by the Holy Spirit (Maciariello, 2003; Wong &

⁸ Notably, the father-agency connection plays out negatively in Jesus’ polemic against the Pharisees in John 8:37-51. Jesus and the Pharisees are similar in the sense that they both seek to do the will of their father. However, they are far from the same because they have two different fathers. As such, the Pharisees are both servants and leaders. The problem is that they are serving the wrong master.

Davey, 2007). It is precisely in this regard that the Johannine corpus clarifies that the motivation to serve does not evolve out of thin air but rather comes from a sense of being called and commissioned to serve – not only something but – someone beyond oneself.⁹ It is the love of the Father that drives God to send the Son (3:16), and this motivation manifests itself in servanthood. In John, it begins with the Father, not a natural feeling to serve.

A second and related point is that Jesus does not merely – or even primarily – act as a servant in the Gospel of John. The highlighting of Jesus as a humble and meek servant is certainly correct, but it is one-sided and arguably reflects cultural attitudes just as much as it does justice to the Gospel narratives. More than 60 years ago, Niebuhr (1951) wrote a prediction that seems to play out in the present discourse on Christ as the archetypal servant leader:

It would not be surprising if a new school of interpreters arose in the wake of existentialists with an attempt to understand him [Jesus] as the man of radical humility. But the humility of Jesus is humility before God, and can only be understood as the humility of the Son. He neither exhibited nor commended and communicated the humility of inferiority-feeling before other men. Before Pharisees, high priests, Pilate, and “that fox” Herod he showed a confidence that had no trace of self-abnegation. Whatever may be true of his Messianic self-consciousness, he spoke with authority and acted with confidence of power. (p. 26)

We should also note that the humility and service that Jesus displays in the Fourth Gospel are directed to the Father for the benefit of the believing community. From a Johannine perspective, the notion that “a servant leader puts himself in the place of a servant and puts the people in the seat of the master and thinks about how to serve them” (Chung, 2011, p. 162) is not entirely true. The evangelist makes it evidently clear that the Father is in the seat of the master and that service to others is a result thereof. To view the foot washing scene as an example of servant leadership is in some ways to miss the point because Jesus acts as the one who comes from and returns to the Father, not as the one who is the servant of men. Jesus the servant is also Jesus the sent Son – the prophet, the temple-cleanser, the miracle-worker – and people who seek to emulate his example must take all these aspects into consideration.¹⁰ The problem with an excessive focus on servant leadership is not that it is wrong but rather that this aspect of Jesus’ mission is easily elevated at the expense of other important perspectives, thus ignoring the need for alternative models of Christian leadership.

⁹ This perspective is neither exclusively Christian nor totally absent in the wider servant leadership discourse. Sendjaya, Sarros, and Santora note that all major religions as well as non-religious philosophies share “the internal conviction that the servant leader is a servant of a higher being or power, and in obedient gratitude to that higher being or power, serves other people.” See Sen Sendjaya, James C. Sarros, and Joseph C. Santora, “Defining and Measuring Servant leadership Behaviour in Organizations,” *Journal of Management Studies* 45, no. 2 (2008): 406, doi:10.1111/j.1467-6486.2007.00761.x.

¹⁰ In addition to overemphasizing the servant perspectives in the evangelists’ description of Jesus, there seems to be some uncertainty with regard to what constitutes leadership in the Gospels. One example is Efrain Agosto’s study *Servant leadership: Jesus and Paul* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2005), which, in many ways, is an excellent resource concerning the counter-cultural leadership of Jesus and Paul. However, as one reviewer notes, the lack of a clear leadership definition leads Agosto to interpret everything Jesus does – from exorcisms to helping the poor – as examples of leadership. See James W., “Servant leadership: Jesus and Paul – Efrain Agosto,” *Conversations in Religion & Theology* 4, no. 2 (2006): 143–54, doi:10.1111/j.1479-2214.2006.00090.x. The problem with this approach is that it empties studies on leadership of meaning; when everything is leadership, nothing is leadership. Thus, the present article has built a case for Johannine perspectives on servant leadership primarily from John 13, where Jesus clearly identifies himself as having a leading role.

Although the author does not address servant leadership theory specifically, Kessler (2013) warns that any attempt to construct pure Biblical leadership models typically ignores the influence of their cultural context and consequently end up baptizing secular leadership theories. This outcome is not a problem provided that the proponents of certain leadership paradigms acknowledge their cultural and historical underpinnings. When we ignore the contextual influence, however, temporal constructs are easily perceived as timeless truths, and the Bible is read through the lens of contemporary leadership theories. This phenomenon is what Kessler describes as the reconstruction pitfall in the development of Christian leadership theory, and the bold proclamation of servant leadership as the Christian leadership model *per excellence* seems to fit this pattern. Niewold (2007) argues that the embrace of servant leadership in evangelical circles is the result of influence from secular ideology and sentiment, even in their most Christianized forms:

Much of servant leadership theory seems to be based on circular reasoning: since Christian leadership according to the common argument must of necessity be servantlike, and since Christian leadership is based on what Christ was like, Christ must have been above all else a servant. (p. 122)

For Niewold, such reasoning is based on an understanding of Jesus that is well-suited for theorizing about leadership in the present cultural climate but that is tainted by a distorted and heterodox Christology. Niewold's critique is probably too harsh, given that the question at hand is not whether Christ was a servant leader; there is abundant evidence for the claim that Jesus promoted leadership principles counter to those that were common in his day. Instead, the question is whether the Christ of contemporary servant leadership theory is the Christ of the Bible, and in this regard, Niewold has a valid point. Whether Christ is a servant to the world thus depends on how one defines servanthood. Dulles (2002) notes that the term connotes three things: work done under obligation, not freely; work related to the benefits of others, not oneself; and work that is humble and demeaning. In the first meaning, Christ is not a servant of men because Jesus' allegiance belongs to the Father, not the world. However, the second and third understandings apply to Christ because he works out of love and provides an example of humility in service for others. There are consequences here for his followers, and the subsequent section of the paper briefly addresses the implications of the study for Christian ministry.

The sending son and the serving community

As the Fourth Gospel proceeds beyond chapter 13, the agency motif previously used to describe the relationship between Father and Son continues in another sending: the sending of the disciples in the power of the Holy Spirit (20:21-22, cf. 17:18). Just as Jesus was an agent of the Father, the disciples are now commissioned as agents of him (Witherington, 1995). "Whereas the sending of the Son is the heart of the Fourth Gospel's plot, its conclusion is open-ended, spilling into the story of the disciples" (Keener, 2003, p. 1204). It is no accident that the first allusion to the commissioning of the disciples is placed in the context of the foot washing. In this very atmosphere of humility and servanthood, Jesus summarizes his own

sending and links it to the sending of the disciples: “a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent (*apostolos*) greater than the one who sent him” (13:16). Jesus’ authorization of the disciples as his agents is here encompassed by the imperative to follow his example (v. 15) and the sending of them as his agents (v. 20).¹¹ Consequently, Jesus’ followers are sent into the world to replicate both his message and his method – to offer cleansing from sin through Christ by being servants who perform self-sacrificing deeds modelled on the example of their master. Thus, servanthood must be viewed in relation to public witness and central missiological concepts (Niewold, 2007). To heed Jesus’ example is to apprehend that “if he who, they acknowledge as ‘Teacher’ and ‘Master’ (revered terms) stooped to perform a slave’s task for them, how much more readily should the disciples do the like for each other!” (Beasley-Murray, 1999, pp. 235–236). As servants and agents, the disciples have no choice but to follow their master’s leading. As the mission of the master includes service and humility, the disciples have no choice but to be humble servants – even as leaders.

Conclusion

The discussion above has revealed that, although John portrays Jesus as a servant leader, service is not a leitmotif in the Fourth Gospel. Rather, servanthood should be viewed in light of the more dominant themes of sending and sonship. The implication is not that servant leadership is a futile construct. The point made here is that the sayings and examples of Jesus as a servant leader cannot be isolated from his broader mission. Christ was indeed a servant, and servant leadership, as such, is a valid expression of Christian leadership. However, Jesus was not a servant above all, and therefore, one should be cautious in advocating servant leadership as the ultimate manifestation of leadership modelled on Christ.

¹¹ It is noteworthy that the institution of agency (*shaliach*) constitutes the NT concept of apostleship (Keener, 2003, pp. 311–313).

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