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ISSN: 0799-1711

PROFESSIONAL  
THEOLOGICAL  
JOURNAL FOR  
THE CARIBBEAN  
COMMUNITY

# CJET

VOLUME  
15

2016

Caribbean Journal of Evangelical Theology

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**TOWARDS  
A  
THEOLOGY  
OF  
SERVANTHOOD**  
by  
Rev'd Christopher  
Newton  
(PhD, cand.)

### **Introduction**

For many years now, the concept of servant-leadership has been much talked about in the organizations of this world. This is because people in “secular society” have come to realize the importance of a particular type of leadership that gives birth to, and sustains, organizational and financial success. This has precipitated a flood of

literature focussed on how things get done in organizations, a recurring concept being that of servant-leadership.

The need for such studies in the church has always been relevant, but unfortunately the church has not naturally embraced self-assessment and critique. As a result, the so called “secular” society has taken the lead in leadership studies. Having now realised our short fall, the church has been drawing from the findings of many of the studies done around leadership in institutions. The problem is that the nature of the church, in contrast to the rest of the world, demands that the fundamental principles and motivations that guide the people and programmes of the church be fundamentally different from that of the world.

The purpose of this paper is to present to you my reflections towards a Biblical understanding and application of servant-hood. It is divided into three main sections. The first is the definition, which includes what it is not, and what it is. The second; The Servant of God, argues that the believer who is called to be a servant, must first see himself as the servant of God. This includes essentials of becoming an effective servant of God. Thirdly, The Servant of

People, argues that the servant of God must also be the servant of people, and outlines pertinent considerations in this regard.

### **Definition of Servant-hood**

Robert K. Greenleaf was the champion of the concept of servant-leadership for many years. He has passed on, but his works still find prominence in the quest of many to improve their organizations. Greenleaf's concept of Servant Leadership arose out of the need he saw in the institutions of society - churches, businesses, universities - to make a salient contribution to the leadership crises of the 1960s to 70s. The idea developed from his reading of Hermann Hesse's *Journey to the East*, where the departure of the servant Leo from a particular expedition precipitated the abandonment of that expedition. One of the members of the expedition later found out that the sponsors of the expedition was led by Leo, the man they all knew to be a servant, and realized that his presence had been vital to the expedition, as all was going well until the servant, who was the one who really kept them focussed and sustained them with his spirit and his songs, departed from them. In commenting on the servant, Greenleaf noted that:

Leo was actually the leader all of the time, but he was servant first because that was what he was, deep down inside. Leadership was bestowed upon a man who was by nature a servant. It was something given, or assumed, that could be taken away. His servant nature was the real man, not bestowed, not assumed, and not to be taken away. He was servant first. (Greenleaf, 1977, pp. 7-8).

This, for Greenleaf, is the servant leader. Such a person he sees as one who has a natural feeling of wanting to serve, to serve first, and the highlight of such a person is the care taken "to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served"(Greenleaf, 1977, p. 13). This he contrasts against the person who wants to be a

leader first, whether because of the feeling of need to have power, or for material possessions (Greenleaf, 1977).

He acknowledges that the notion of the servant as leader did not come to him from conscious logic, but as an intuitive insight as he contemplated Leo. Implicit in this confession, however, is the suggestion that scripture or Christian exposure played no part in the formulation of his notion of servant leadership. Greenleaf addresses his essays mainly to two groups: “young people who have a natural disposition to be servants and whose life-styles may yet be shaped by conscious choices, and those of their elders who want to help young people to realize their potential as servants”(Greenleaf, 1979, p. 9).

#### **What it is not**

Greenleaf defines servant and serving in terms of the consequences of the serving on the ones being served, or on others who may be affected by the action. In his definition of servant-leadership, he noted:

The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?(Greenleaf, 1970)

He later added: “No one will knowingly be hurt by the action, directly or indirectly”(Greenleaf, 1998).

The positive of Greenleaf’s definition is that the nature of servant-leadership is that it is geared towards an objective that benefits persons other than the leader. The problem with it, and intrinsically so, is that it does not subscribe to God’s requirements of humanity. Any definition of servant-leadership that does not accept God’s definition of a servant, and particularly in relation to man’s

accountability to God, has missed the mark, and must be firmly rejected by God's people as a pattern for kingdom living.

### **What it is**

Any definition of servant-leadership that will be applicable to the people of God must intrinsically include an understanding of the nature and constitution of God's people. This demands that our focus be not merely on servant-leadership, but on that which is Biblical. Issuing from this is the need for us not to seek to make the Biblical corpus say what we want it to say but to listen to its revelation in relation to our needs. What it says, in this regard, is that the focus of the church ought not to be on servant-leadership, but on servanthood. For this is what must be common among all God's people, whether He chooses you to be a supervisor of His people or a simple labourer in the vineyard of service.

I present to you, therefore, two definitions: Biblical servanthood, which is the inclusive term, and Biblical servant-leadership, which identifies Biblical servanthood within a particular context of privilege. Biblical Servanthood *is a lifestyle disposition, whereby a believer's attitudes, motives, and actions towards others, are governed by the fundamental belief that he/she is God's servant first, in all that he does, and that as a representative of Christ, his service to others, whether as leader, colleague, or follower, must be rendered in a spirit of obligation to the will of God, and to the greatest good of those individuals.* The second definition: Biblical servant-leadership, then, *is the practice of leadership, in whatever area of life, that flows from a disposition in which one sees himself/herself as a servant of God, with a divine obligation to relate to others within his context as a representative of Jesus Christ, and thus seeks to embrace Christ's view of, and attitude towards people in his efforts towards the accomplishment of goals and objectives dedicated to the glory of God.* What should already be clear in our minds is that this definition cannot be embraced by

all and sundry, for there is a fundamental distinction between the people of God and the world, as the things of the Spirit are spiritually discerned.

The framework that makes servanthood possible for the people of God is the example of the life and ministry of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and His promise of empowerment through the Holy Spirit. Paul's statement in Philippians 4:13 implies the tremendous possibilities available to each believer, when he said, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." Our Lord, Jesus, demonstrated to us the essence and extent of servanthood, as the scripture declares, "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:5-8 NASB)

I do believe that the overflow of attitude and disposition of true servanthood was most evident, when He agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane, when the crushing reality and the weight of humanity's sin began to bear down upon Him. He said "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42 KJV). Here, I believe, the humanity of Christ was most evident in the scriptures, and so too was His obedience to the Father.

### **The Servant of God**

This takes us to the first essential of servanthood; that you, as a part of God's people, where ever He affords you the privilege to serve, be it a supervisor or a simple labourer, see yourself as a servant of God first, above everything else. You could have been redeemed and taken to glory, but you were left here, and left here to

give God glory; for “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for *God’s* own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellences of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvellous light” (1 Peter 2:9 NASB). There are two essentials that must be embraced if you are to excel in living the requirement of being God’s servant first: (a) You must demonstrate obedience, and (b) you must express love.

### **Demonstration of Obedience**

Obedience refers to the observance of God’s revealed will, in your life, for the purpose of giving God glory. The Gospels, and particularly the book of Luke, which identifies Jesus as the Isaianic servant of God (Moore, 1997), present Him as the willing, obedient, enduring servant who paid the ultimate cost of allegiance to His Lord. In His relationship with the Father, Jesus Christ represented what God wanted man to be before the incarnation and what He wants man to become since the incarnation. Adam was made to be God’s servant (Genesis 1:27-28; 2:15, 19-20), to walk in obedience (Genesis 2:16-17), and to have fellowship and communion with Him (Genesis 3:8-9). Sin was allowed access to the relationship, and it damaged the relationship that God desired between Himself and humanity. Christ, in His redemptive work, has restored that relationship for us; but we need to preserve it by our obedience. This requires: (a) Knowledge of God’s will, (b) Self-mastery, and (c) Faith that God’s way is best.

**Knowledge of God’s will.** We must give ourselves over to the pursuit of knowing God’s will. How can you expect to make the right decision in respect of issues that face you on a daily basis if you do not know God’s will for His people, and for you, in that particular situation? And how can you expect to effectively lead God’s people, at whatever level, except in the way that meets with God’s approval. The servant of God must know God’s will.

**Self-mastery.** It seems to me that the greatest threat to a Christian is not Satan, as many of us suppose, rather, it is the self. In *The Imitations of Christ*, Book One, à Kempis (n.d.) noted, “DO NOT yield to every impulse and suggestion but consider things carefully and patiently in the light of God's will.” The natural cravings and desires that God gave to us must be kept in check if we are to be the best that we can be. If we master ourselves, with the power that is available to us through the Holy Spirit, can you comprehend how victorious we would be over Satan and his schemes? “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, And he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city (Proverbs 16:32 NASB). Kempis further noted that,

A man makes the most progress and merits the most grace precisely in those matters wherein he gains the greatest victories over self and most mortifies his will. True, each one has his own difficulties to meet and conquer, but a diligent and sincere man will make greater progress even though he have more passions than one who is more even-tempered but less concerned about virtue.(à Kempis, n.d.) The servant of God must therefore master self.

**Faith.** The late New Testament Church of God minister, Rev. Mortimer Blair, in an interview with his granddaughter, Nadine Blair, aired years ago on Love 101, a Christian radio station, defined faith as “active confidence in a reliable God.” This is not inconsistent with the definition of Hebrews 11 (the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.), yet it highlights the importance of action as the fundamental expression of faith. “Without faith it is impossible to please God, for it is necessary for the one who comes to God to believe that He is, and is a rewarder of those who seek Him” (my translation of Hebrews 11:6). You must embrace the perspective that whatever God requires you to do in a particular situation, is the right thing, and the best thing, irrespective of the opinions and actions of others. Your faith will be

demonstrated by your obedience in actually doing that thing. The servant of God must therefore have faith.

### **Expression of Love**

The second essential that must be embraced if you are to excel in living the requirement of being God's servant first, is Love; love towards God, and love towards God's creation. This is of primary importance to God, and fundamental to having communion with Him. It is a fact that within a master-servant relationship, there need not be any communion, for the master has tremendous authority over the servant. But God made man for the purpose of communion with Him, and this is only real when God's affection is reciprocated by man; when God's love is received and returned.

**Love towards God.** The *Sh'mā* or Shema passage of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 has been regarded, and endorsed by Christ (Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30; and Luke 10:27), as the most important commandment from God. It reads, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." This demands your greatest affection, your most intense attention, and your most willing submission. Your relationship and communion with God must not be only because God is awesome and a consuming fire, but because you love Him; because you have set your affection on Him. Only then can you say, like Joseph, in a situation of promising pleasure from Potiphar's wife – an opportunity for natural release of inherent libido; "It is no pleasure for me. How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God" (Genesis 39:9 KJV). The servant of God must therefore love God.

**Love towards God's creation.** The second of the two greatest commandments, Jesus noted, is "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). For the particular purpose intended, our emphasis here is on people,

but in Genesis, God put man over all His creation to care for it, and He expects His people today, in as much as we can, so to do. However, within the context of being God's arms extended to people, we are expected to love people.

I find the New Command that Jesus gave to the disciples in John 13:34 to be very revelatory in relation to the second great commandment. For, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself," begs the question as to who is my neighbour? It seems likely, as it is today, that many were supposedly giving love to their neighbour, but to those whom they themselves regarded to be their neighbours. Jesus' words to His disciples were, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, to the same degree that I have loved you, that you also love one another [my translation]." He repeated this in another setting, John 15:12, and clarified it by saying, "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lays down his life for his friends." I see this as an improvement on the second great command, in much the same way as Christ addressed adultery, when He said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:27-28). The improvement therefore means that God's servant should be prepared to go where ever He sends, and to do whatever He requires His servant to be; that is, His arms extended, in the service of others, whether as a supervisor of many, or as a simple labourer in His vineyard. The servant of God must therefore have love towards God's creation.

### **The Servant of People**

This takes us to the second essential of servant-hood. The major distinction between the two essentials is that the primary focus on Biblical servant-hood is that of being a servant of God. Without this focus, the concept is irrelevant and inapplicable, and

particularly because of the nature of human beings. The prophet Jeremiah tells us that, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick” (Jeremiah 17:9 NIV). It is no wonder then that humans are prone to doing things for others, under the pretence that we mean them well, when what we are really doing is establishing ourselves in one way or another. The distinction continues; that as a logical outcome of being a servant of God, Biblical servant-hood’s secondary focus is on being a servant of people. It has always been God’s way to use people to bless other people.

There are two fundamental considerations for being an effective servant of people. They are:(a) Love for people, and (b) Having a Biblical view of self. Both these considerations demand a particular emphasis on the vessel that God desires to use, so as to make adjustments to that vessel that will be consistent with, and easily facilitate, the smooth flow of God’s grace from Himself, through the privileged vessel, and to the recipients He so loves; the objects of His sacrifice in Jesus Christ.

### **Love for People**

To effectively love people, we must have and put to use certain inner resources to compensate for the inconsistencies of being human. These resources are called virtues. Here we shall present four, not exhaustive by any means, but basic to facilitating the development of those whom God calls us to serve. They are (a) Humility, (b) Patience, (c) Endurance, and (d) Willingness to learn.

**Humility.**I present two aspects of humility, namely, that of how you view others, and that of how you view self. The latter shall be addressed in a later section. It would seem that humility has no real measurement outside of a relationship with others, for its opposites, such as pride and arrogance, are really only properly expressed in relation to people. However, if you are to offer godly service, at whatever level, you must have some understanding of

those whom you serve. If this is to happen, there must be some measure of self-disclosure on the part of those who are served. This will be best facilitated when you are prepared to meet them where they are, particularly when you are in a position of leadership. It has been said that “the aim of teaching is to get the learners from where they are to where you want them to be.” But to do this effectively, you must begin where they are. It is very important, therefore, in your service to others, to approach them for Christ’s perspective of them. Are they precious, are they worth making time for, are they worth listening to, can they contribute to your development, or do their best interest warrant some adjustments on your part? Again Kempis notes:

We must not rely too much upon ourselves, for grace and understanding are often lacking in us. We have but little inborn light, and this we quickly lose through negligence. Often we are not aware that we are so blind in heart. Meanwhile we do wrong, and then do worse in excusing it. At times we are moved by passion, and we think it zeal. We take others to task for small mistakes, and overlook greater ones in ourselves. We are quick enough to feel and brood over the things we suffer from others, but we think nothing of how much others suffer from us. If a man would weigh his own deeds fully and rightly, he would find little cause to pass severe judgment on others.(à Kempis, n.d.)

The servant of people must therefore practice humility.

**Patience.** One does not have to read the Gospels over and over to realize that an important part of the training of the apostles was the patience that Jesus demonstrated as He taught and mentored them. To love people is to operate from a commitment to doing all that you reasonably can to further their best interest. This often demands adjustments on your part, in order to deal with their slowness in grasping what you are delivering to them, or in appreciating you for what you are doing for them. Jesus had to

rebuke Peter a number of times, for Peter did not seem to grasp, as readily as he probably should, what Christ was teaching. But Christ was there for him, so much so that after Christ rose from the dead, in sending a message to His disciples to wait for Him, He singled out Peter, to ensure that he got the understanding that Jesus felt no less about him, in spite of his mistake. So too must Christian leaders be patient with those whom we serve, whether above us, below us, or on our level. The servant of people must therefore have patience.

**Endurance.** Endurance refers to that act, quality, or power of enduring hardships or stress. Hardships and stress may appropriately be regarded as coming with the territory of Christian service. “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers” (Ephesians 4:12). It is imperative, then, that our expressions of love for people involve a disposition towards endurance; and endurance of what they themselves may throw at us. For many persons, the worst thing that they could ever face in ministry is the sense of a lack of appreciation on the part of those who are served. But if you do not endure, how can you expect to achieve your objective? It is therefore a humbling but necessary process in the quest for Biblical servant-hood. The servant of people must therefore exercise endurance in dealing with people.

**Willingness to Learn.** Willingness to learn is perhaps one of the greatest challenges of leadership in the visible church. This is so, I believe, because the tradition of the church places a certain premium on those in leadership positions, so much so that some Christians may mistakenly presume that we deserve to be where God has privileged us to be. Recognize, therefore, that there is much to be learnt from those whom you serve, to enable you to be a better servant of God, and ultimately a truer servant of people. An instructive note is given in 2 Timothy 2:24-25, “And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all *men*, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves.”

### **Biblical View of Self**

The Bible demands that we endeavour to see ourselves from divine perspective. We were all born as Adam and Eve's heritage; heirs to a nature of sin. God's judgment against sin puts all sinners at a base level of depravity, and on a course that leads to hell and the lake of fire. It is from this that all Christians have been delivered. This deliverance has come, not by humanity's initiative, but by that of the living God. "It is by grace through faith, not of works lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8). Now, if "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23), and "the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick" (Jeremiah 17:9), then we all do not deserve to be alive. So since we are alive, whether we are Christians or not, wealthy or not, healthy or not, educated or not, it is as a result of God's unmerited favour. In terms of the reality of God's sovereignty and man's accountability to Him, therefore, the only thing that separates us from the beggar on the street is the grace that God grants to us. Our exercise of leadership should therefore be characterised by (a) Inward humility, and (b) Dependence on God.

**Inward Humility.** In exercising the privilege granted to us to serve others, at whatever level, remember that it is a privilege that has been granted. "For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think *of himself* more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God has given to every man the measure of faith" (Romans 12:3), and this indeed is because all that we may ever be, is of necessity by the grace of God. A personal friend often reminded me that "the best of men are men at best." In commenting on humility, Kempis noted that,

It is often good for us to have others know our faults and rebuke them, for it gives us greater humility. When a man humbles himself because of his faults, he easily placates those about him and readily appeases those who are angry

with him. It is the humble man whom God protects and liberates; it is the humble whom He loves and consoles. To the humble He turns and upon them bestows great grace, that after their humiliation He may raise them up to glory. He reveals His secrets to the humble, and with kind invitation bids them come to Him. Thus, the humble man enjoys peace in the midst of many vexations, because his trust is in God, not in the world. Hence, you must not think that you have made any progress until you look upon yourself as inferior to all others. (à Kempis, n.d.)

Kempis' use of "inferior" is not in relation to essence, but certainly regarding one's stature. For we do not serve well those we do not deem worthy to be served. The servant of people must therefore practice inward humility.

**Dependence on God.** The Holy Scriptures are explicit in teaching that you "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight"(Proverbs 3:5-6 NIV). It is all too easy, like Nebuchadnezzar, to claim credit for what God has accomplished in our lives. Often we allow our success in working with people to cloud our vision, and we presume that we hold the key to our successes. But achievements in the things of God have never been by man's might nor power, by our education or influence, by our wealth or stature. It has always been, and will always be by the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit. "The *thoughts* of God no one knows except the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2:11), and it is the work of the Holy Spirit that makes us effective witnesses, according to Acts 1:8. Therefore, we should never presume that we have God's approval without our dependence on Him. The servant of people must therefore practice dependence on God.

### Conclusion

Within the context of service among the people of God, the concept of servant-hood is rather more inclusive and appropriate, than that of servant-leadership. Biblical Servant-hood is a lifestyle disposition, whereby a believer's attitudes, motives, and actions towards others, are governed by the fundamental belief that he/she is God's servant first, in all that he does, and that as a representative of Christ, his service to others, whether as leader, colleague, or follower, must be rendered in a spirit of obligation to the will of God, and to the greatest good of those individuals.

Being a good servant of God, demands (a) obedience, which requires a knowledge of God's will, self-mastery, and faith that God's way is the right way; and (b) love, which is manifested through love for God, and love towards God's creation. The secondary focus of Biblical servant-hood is that of being the servant of people. This requires (a) love for people, which challenges one's humility, patience, endurance, and willingness to learn, and (b) a Biblical view of self, which requires humility and dependence on God. The servant of God must both present and represent God, not himself/herself.

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