



Abby Amstutz

Introduction to Servant Leadership

Working at a Christian leadership organization, I spend my days immersed in another “S” word, one far less weaponized in Christian circles: servant leadership. This term, reflecting God’s servant heart, can shed some helpful light on the the troubled conversation about submission.

The idea of “servant leadership” has become so prevalent in secular leadership development that it may appear to have lost much of its meaning. Yet, derived originally from Jesus’s example, servant leadership is powerful and revolutionary. It subverts the native assumptions of human leadership, which, regardless of culture, tend to include power, prestige, and self-aggrandizement. Instead, servant leadership defines leadership as serving, intentionally putting the interests of those you lead ahead of your own.

Leadership in God’s Image

Through this leadership paradigm shift, Jesus turned the systems of the world upside down:

Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? *But I am among you as one who serves*” (Luke 22:25–27, emphasis added).

Jesus was saying something truly startling. We had built God in our own image, but through his incarnation,

he taught us to rebuild leadership in *his* image. Paul beautifully articulates this in Philippians 2:5–7, in the words of what was likely an ancient hymn developed by the early church:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

This revelation, when deeply grasped and honestly followed, changes everything. A Cuban church planter trained by my organization recently shared with us: “If Jesus, being the Lord of lords and King of kings, came to serve and not to be served, the least *we* can learn is to serve.” Leadership has been redefined from the top down, so who are we not to follow? God has called us into a joyful new vocation as servant leaders, reflecting his image and embodying his servant heart in the world.



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A Call for Both Men and Women

By identifying leadership with servants and slaves (below even first-century women on the social ladder in most ways), Jesus confounded the leadership expectations of his world (and ours). It is no longer important if would-be leaders are “fit” by the world’s standards, that is, if they are commanding, powerful, male, or even the most proficient, if skills are all they have. What matters most is if they serve and, by serving, emulate the heart of God. Though women were not numbered among the twelve apostles,¹ Jesus clearly had no qualms welcoming female disciples. Women, including the wealthy and powerful Joanna (wife of Herod’s steward, Chusa, Luke

8:3) traveled with him on his itinerant ministry and financially supported him. Mary sat at Jesus’s feet in the posture of a disciple learning from a rabbi—a position of a leader-in-training—and was warmly commended by Jesus for doing so (Luke 10:38–42).

Quite simply, Jesus never made any gender-based distinction when redefining leadership, through his words or his actions. The burden of proof is on those who would try to impose the patriarchal assumptions of the first century onto Jesus’s radical new teaching.

It is clear that God calls both men and women into a revolutionary new vocation as servant leaders. Both genders are called to serve using the unique gifts God has given them and steward well that which he’s entrusted to them. All are called to create, to have agency, to lead, and to wisely balance freedom and responsibility. We see such charges entrusted to humankind without reference to gender throughout Scripture: in the cultural mandate (Gen. 1:28), the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20), and Paul’s discussion of gifts and roles in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:1–11, 27–31).

Servant leadership is not passive or impotent, but a dynamic life of service grounded in our unique identities as beloved image-bearers of God, women and men alike. Through this humble form of leading and lives of mutual submission (Eph. 5), we enact God’s love and redemption in a world that so desperately needs them.

Aren’t Women Already Servants?

However, this leads to a question that has long troubled me. When men lower themselves by serving others, they are recognized, rightly, as leading like Christ. Women, on the other hand, often don’t need to “lower” themselves to serve others because that’s what they’ve always done. Even societies that promote equality in theory still fall prey to disparities between women and men on a cultural level. When women put the interests of others before their own, then, aren’t they just fulfilling their expected societal role? In other words, women and men are not starting from the same place; should servant leadership really be the intended destination of both?

Yes—though the path they take may look different. It is true that history has not treated the sexes the same. However, while men appear to benefit from patriarchy, they too are harmed by it, even if in different ways. In patriarchal systems, men are often trapped in rigid societal expectations, prevented from becoming their full, integrated, and healthy selves—and are deprived of women’s insights and leadership.

Woman or man, we need not fear or chase what the world says of us, whether it limits us or stokes our egos, because we belong to a deeper authority. We are free from the world's value systems and hierarchies.

For women's part, they may be culturally familiar with a type of servanthood, but not the empowered, secure, and humble identity of a servant leader. In a patriarchal family or society, women may learn to express leadership in socially acceptable, though not always healthy, ways. In an attempt to retake their God-given agency, women may sometimes fall into distorted or unhealthy behaviors like manipulation, domineering, or exchanging strength and responsibility for being put on a pedestal of beauty and domesticity.

And so, both sexes require healing. Both men and women need to be converted to Jesus's model of servant leadership. In this model, serving is not subservience, but leading—powerfully and humbly—from below. It is leading *together*, confidently putting the interests of our brothers and sisters first because we know they will also seek ours. In this way, servant leadership and mutual submission work hand in hand.

Yet we can only meet this vision when we derive our strength and authority from a source beyond ourselves. For men and women alike, it all comes back to identity in Christ, the true Servant Leader, even if we arrive there traveling from different directions. It is from Jesus that we learn how to serve—and it is *his* servant leadership to us that sustains us in our countercultural calling.

Freedom Through God-Rooted Identities

When Jesus became human (Phil. 2), he did not divest himself of his identity as the beloved Son of God or cut himself off from the flow of life and love of the triune God. We, too, can hardly hope to lead—and especially to lead through serving—if we are not firmly grounded in our identities as beloved sons and daughters of God.

When our identities are rooted in the freedom and love of God, we can descend with him into serving without losing ourselves. For in him, our true selves are found. Woman or man, we need not fear or chase what the world says of us, whether it limits us or stokes our egos, because we belong to a deeper authority. We are free from the world's value systems and hierarchies. When we become convinced of this reality, it becomes much easier to “obey God rather than human beings” (Acts 5:29).

Leadership rooted in the triune nature of God reminds us that leading is not a solitary exercise but is deeply relational. We need each other's unique experiences, testimonies, gifts, and insights—women and men alike. We can only become whole through humble interdependence, mutual submission, and welcoming everyone's diverse gifts, as Paul establishes in 1 Corinthians 12:12–26.

When the body of Christ is cherished, guided, stewarded, and developed by skilled servant leaders, everyone thrives. Leadership then exists not to further the leader's own little kingdom, but to expand God's abundant one, in which everything and everyone is healed, renewed, and brought to fullness of life. It is to this larger vision that we are called, and we begin by participating in—and leading from—God's own servant nature.

Notes

1. While some use this to argue that women are not called to leadership roles, most scholars agree that the twelve disciples were selected as a representation of Israel's twelve tribes, not as a statement on gender. Furthermore, the New Testament's inclusion of women as apostles (Rom 16:7) affirms that this position was not only reserved for men. To read more, see: Tammi Kauffman, “Jesus's Female Disciples—and Why They Weren't Among the Twelve,” *Mutuality Magazine*, November 10, 2021, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/jesus-female-disciples-and-why-they-were-not-among-twelve/>.

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