

1-2018

Servants and Friends: a Biblical Theology of Leadership

Erich Baumgartner

Andrews University, baumgart@andrews.edu

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Recommended Citation

Baumgartner, Erich (2018) "Servants and Friends: a Biblical Theology of Leadership," *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*: Vol. 9: No. 1, 106-108.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jacl/vol9/iss1/10>

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BOOK REVIEWS

SERVANTS & FRIENDS: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF LEADERSHIP

*By Skip Bell (Ed.)
Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews
University Press (2014)
Paperback, 435 pages*

*Reviewed by ERICH W.
BAUMGARTNER*

In this groundbreaking volume published by Andrews University Press, some 20 scholars examine the sacred text of the Old and New Testaments, as well as a selection of six biblical leadership narratives, to lay the foundation for a biblical theology of leadership. Each of the first three sections is composed of six chapters, providing an array of fascinating studies of leadership in the Bible. The fourth section attempts to integrate the multiple facets of leadership insight unearthed throughout the various contributions into what the editor, Skip Bell, claims to be “the most complete biblical theology of leadership available.”

Readers hoping for new insights for leadership emerging from biblical themes are not disappointed. For

instance, even if you are well read in the “servant-leadership” literature, you will marvel at the many facets of the servant theme Richard Davidson develops in Chapter 1. Be open for surprises. Would you have thought of the creation event as a leadership act par excellence? In Chapter 2, as Doukhan plumbs the depths of Hebrew thinking (rarely seen in leadership presentations), we see God, the author of life, at the “head of time” (*bereshit*, “in the beginning,” derives from *rosh*, “head,” a word often designating one who is leading), shaping beings to be filled with His life-giving Spirit to be like Him. Here is God—the One without peers—creating into His own image, sharing His leadership with those He created—both female and male. Humans are both like Him yet different from Him. In setting aside holy time with them, God gifts them with His companionship. Giving them the capacity of individuality, He entrusts to them the power to go a different way. Doukhan’s thoughts on leadership as sharing, trusting and ultimately creating are fascinating and worth the price of the book. But this is just the beginning.

Given the diversity of books in the Bible, the texture of leadership themes is incredibly rich and complex. Each author struggled with that diversity in different ways. Thus in the next chapters, Gane paints good leadership through 11 transcultural principles in the Pentateuch, while Moskala derives lessons from the narratives in the historical books of the Old Testament. In looking at the wisdom literature and the Psalms, Webberding finds that leadership is more than leaders at work to accomplish something but “a means of knowing God,” even entering the ecosystem of God’s larger purpose. And Petersen points out that while

the prophets decried the spiritual and social conditions of God's people, the Day of the Lord would bring a stunning paradoxical reversal that included social justice denied by corrupt elders.

The New Testament chapters are equally rich. No other motive for leadership compares to Jesus' life and sacrifice. He is the servant, the Christ, sent from God, and also the "Instructor" (Matt. 23:1-2), a word which could also be translated "leader," as Johnston points out. Servant leadership in the Gospels is portrayed as counter-cultural, clashing not only with the expectations of the general culture but even with those of Christ's closest circle.

Especially interesting was Alexe's analysis of the narrative of Peter's transformation from overconfident disciple into spiritually mature leader, able to overcome his cultural limitations. Note how Peter's three denials are confronted by Jesus' three heart-piercing questions before the three-fold commissioning. But even after that, Peter needed a persistent threefold conversation with God and unmistakably supernatural instructions to help him overcome his exclusivist and theologically erroneous reluctance to minister to Gentiles. The nature of leadership derives from Christ's mission to the world and is thus rooted in the Gospel. Yet, leaders deal with real life issues that range from the celebration of salvation to the messiness of human failure and error. To finish the New Testament section, Tonstad's analysis of the book of Revelation as a book of transparent leadership reminds us that God does not operate in hiding.

While the first two sections of the book carefully sift the 66 biblical books for leadership lessons, the third section analyze six sets of biblical stories of leadership: Nehemiah, women in the Old Testament, Jesus,

Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. All of these chapters are full of insights for Christian leaders, but Jo Ann Davidson's stands out as the only one that highlights some of the amazing contributions of women leaders: courage and vision casting through song (Deborah), leadership as learning for a royal seeker for wisdom (Queen of Sheba), speaking truth to power based on scriptural authority (Hulda the prophetess), and the sense of timing and death-defying courage of Esther. Sauvagnat's study tracking the enduring contribution of Barnabas as a mentor and empowering leader makes for a worthy conclusion of this section. His observation that the disciples Barnabas and Paul worked with were first called "Christians"—followers of Christ, not disciples of Barnabas and Paul—is a telling commentary on the fruit of Christian servant leadership.

By the time I got to the fourth section of the book, I was delightfully exhausted. Each chapter had brought out rich insights about leadership as possible ingredients for a biblical theology of leadership. Would Skip Bell, the editor of the book, and Stan Patterson, a professor of leadership at Andrews University, succeed in creating a meaningful synthesis? Without doubt this was a daunting task which readers will appreciate after reading 340 pages of biblical analysis. I think both of them succeeded admirably to lay out their case. Bell's quest to develop a biblical theology that transcends culture starts with God's relationship with His people. Leadership is thus a gift to the whole community that is shared, rooted in God's vision for humanity and expressed in service. This gift is willing to take risks and sacrifice for others. Patterson's reflection explores the countercultural design of communal spiritual leader-

ship in the New Testament. Pointing to the predominant metaphor of the church as a body, he develops an incarnational theology that, in contrast to the patterns of leadership in Roman and Greek culture, is energized by the power of identification and service of love.

Servant and Friends is one of the best attempts to date to mine the riches of the Scriptures to shape our understanding of leadership. The book is well written and rich in its contributions to a better understanding of leadership from a biblical and Christian perspective. As the authors' footnotes show, most of them stuck to their expertise. Biblical scholars usually cite exegetical sources while practical theologians tend to cite spiritual or leadership authors. Where biblical scholars cite current leadership texts, it is often to highlight a convergence of thought, rarely to challenge current popular thinking about leadership. The emphasis was clearly on providing a sound biblical treatment of Christian leadership. In that the authors have clearly succeeded.

I anticipate that this book will become a standard text required in seminary leadership classes. No teacher of Christian leadership can afford to ignore the rich contributions of this volume. It should be part of every pastor's library, and denominational leaders will find rich insights for reflection on their own leadership. I also hope that this volume will spark manifold discussions on what it means to be a Christian leader, a question central to the mission of this journal.

ERICH W. BAUMGARTNER, Ph.D., is Director of the Ph.D. in Leadership Program at Andrews University, where he also serves as Professor of Leadership and Intercultural Communication and Senior Editor of the *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*.

THE END OF LEADERSHIP

By Barbara Kellerman
New York, NY: Harper Business (2012)
Hardcover, 233 pages

Reviewed by RICHARD APARECIDO
TEIXEIRA FIGUEREDO

Barbara Kellerman urges readers to consider the "other side" of leadership. The thesis of *The End of Leadership* is that leadership has changed and that today we must embrace a leadership marked not by commanding or controlling but by a focus on helping people (servant leadership) to achieve their goals. This is the "end" of the traditional leadership style. But Kellerman's accompanying concern is that the "leadership industry" is more interested in making money on this issue than in providing real solutions for leadership. As such, chief among her recommendations is that readers learn more about leadership instead of how to be a leader.

The book has valuable thoughts for those who want to be leaders for this time. One of the concepts is this: "Leadership is devolution of power—from those up to those down below" (p. 3). What a stunning thought! The power of leadership has shifted through the centuries from leaders to followers, especially in the past 30 to 40 years. This model of "followers on the rise, leaders in decline" (p. 20) is making a new sort of sense for the 21st century.

Though the concept has almost no weaknesses, it is controversial in that it parts with the traditional command/control structure that has traditionally marked managed organizations. Kellerman references the social contract in leadership, citing only two reasons that followers may accept a contract today: "either we