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BILL THOMPSON
SERVANT, LEADER, OR BOTH?
A FRESH LOOK AT MARK 10:35-45

Abstract: How can Christian leaders find a balance between serving and leading? Part of the confusion lies in Jesus' striking paradox itself. Following an exegetical study of Mark 10:35-45, I use John Stott's categories of the choices between selfish ambition and sacrifice and between power and service to explore two key areas of application for pastoral leaders. If competent Christian leaders constantly seek to put Christ's mission ahead of their own glory and to put the good of the group before their own desires, then their followers will be more likely to accept their influence.

Keywords: *Servant leadership, church leadership, mission and power*

“Why aren't we having a Christmas Eve service? Christmas Eve is the most important church service of the year. I'd like the minister to give me an explanation why the leaders cancelled it. It's his job to handle these problems.”

It's likely that many preachers and staff members can relate to this e-mail that I received from an upset attendee. Even though this woman is not a member of our church, she felt compelled to hold me accountable for our leadership team's decision. Unfortunately, the reference to Christmas Eve as the “most important church service of the year” is not the only theological mistake in her e-mail. Many Christians, whether lay members or paid staff, struggle to understand the appropriate balance between servant and leader. This woman likely sees the minister as more of a servant than a leader.

The phrase “servant leadership” has always been something of an oxymoron. For example, Robert Greenleaf (2008) asks, “Servant and leader. Can these two roles be fused in one real person, in all levels of status or calling?” (p. 9). This tension is very real for pastors who struggle to balance serving their people on one hand with providing strong, task-oriented leadership on the other hand.

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Of course, the most likely reason for the difficulty of balancing the *servanthood* and *leadership* aspects of ministry lies in Jesus' startling paradox itself. While Jesus' listeners understood the self-serving leadership style of the day, they were undoubtedly surprised by His insistence on a new way of leading by sacrificial service. Derek Tidball (2012) asks, "In introducing this form of leadership, however, Jesus posed a problem for his disciples which many still find hard to resolve. How can one simultaneously be a leader and a servant? Are not [these roles] irreconcilable?" (p. 31).

I believe the best servant leaders are those who have learned how to balance servanthood and leadership. I will begin by defining several key terms for this study. Then, following an exegetical study of Jesus' teaching in Mark 10:35-45, I will use John Stott's (1986) ideas of the choices between selfish ambition and sacrifice, and between power and service, to explore two key areas of application for pastoral leaders (pp. 286-287). I believe that if competent Christian leaders constantly seek to put Christ's mission ahead of their own glory and to put the good of the group before their own desires, then their followers will be inspired to accept their influence. I will conclude this article by offering my own suggestions for blending the aspects of servant and leader into an effective biblical model of leadership.

Terminology

Though terms like *servant*, *leadership*, *power*, and *authority* may seem commonplace, with over 700 definitions of leadership available, any academic study of servant leadership should begin by clarifying the key terminology.¹

Servant: One who humbly takes care of the needs of others (Verbrugge, 2000, pp 136-37).

Leadership: "The process of influencing others toward achieving group goals" (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2001, p. 21).

Servant Leader: One who influences others toward the accomplishment of group goals primarily by making sure their highest-priority needs are met (Greenleaf, 2008, p. 7).

Servant Leadership: A style of leadership that places the good of the organization above the self-interest of the leader (Chu, 2011, p. 15).

Power: The "capacity to influence unilaterally the attitudes and behavior of people in [a] desired direction" (Yukl, 1998, p. 201). Power is morally neutral; it can be used for good or it can be abused (Malphurs, 2003, p. 104).

Authority: The formal or perceived right of one person to influence others or to direct the behavior of subordinate individuals (Yukl, 1998, pp. 179-80, 201). Authority is the permission or right to use power.²

¹Russell West, Ph.D., offered this surprising number of definitions for "leadership" in a doctor of ministry course in advanced leadership at Asbury Seminary in August 2013.

Understanding Jesus' Model of Leadership

The following analysis includes a discussion of the historical and literary contexts, an overview of the passage, and a verse-by-verse discussion of the text. Exegesis is based on the English text of the New International Version of the Bible.

Historical Context

Leadership in the Roman Empire during the first century A.D. was highly structured and tightly controlled. Efrain Agosto (2005) notes that “access to power depended upon several well-defined criteria: namely, wealth, family origins, and occupation. Thus leadership and power were confined to those classes that already had such status elements . . .” (pp. 4-5). Andrew D. Clarke (2000) adds that leadership positions in Greek and Roman cities were held by wealthy people who offered to underwrite the city’s expenses in exchange for status and privileges (pp. 45-47). Since both Jewish and non-Jewish Christians were surrounded by these types of leaders, one can easily see how early Christians accepted this model of leadership and brought it into the church.

Literary Context

The immediate context for this passage is Mark 10:32-52, in which Jesus again warns His disciples that He would be tortured, killed, and raised to life again in Jerusalem. The extended context is Mark 8:22-10:52, which describes the travel of Jesus and the disciples from Bethsaida to Jericho on the way to Jerusalem (Garland, 1996, p. 33). During this travel narrative, Jesus warns His disciples three times of His impending death and resurrection (8:27-9:1; 9:30-37; 10:32-34; Garland). Even with this clear language, however, His disciples remained confused. Don R. Howell (2003) notes that although the disciples did not seem to grasp that Jesus would indeed suffer, they had no problem remembering that He had promised to share His rule with them some day (see Matt. 19:28; p. 196).

This passage divides easily into two main parts. The first part consists of James and John’s request to Jesus that they be allowed to sit at His right and left sides when He comes into His glory (Mark 10:35-40). The second part consists of Jesus’ instruction to the disciples on service, leadership, and sacrifice (10:41-44). The passage concludes with Jesus’ example of His own pending sacrifice (10:45; Stein, 2008, p. 482).

²Stanley Patterson, in correspondence with the author (May 14, 2015).

Exegesis

The exegetical analysis is divided as follows—the brothers’ request (10:35-37), Jesus’ response (10:38-40), His comparison and contrast of leadership models (10:41-44), and His own example of sacrificial leadership (10:45).

³⁵Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”

³⁶“What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.

³⁷They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”

³⁸“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”

³⁹“We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, ⁴⁰but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”

⁴¹When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. ⁴²Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (NIV)

35-37: While the disciples have undoubtedly listened to Jesus’ warnings, they seem to be focused more on their own prestige than on Jesus’ pending passion (Edwards, 2002, p. 322). David Garland (1996) comments that “each time [Jesus] speaks to them about his suffering, his words go in one ear and out the other” (p. 410). Their failure to understand indicates that they were thinking more of their own coming glory than of sacrifice or suffering.

As it is today, in Jesus’ time the greatest places of honor were to the immediate right and left of the key leader or guest of honor (Edwards, 2002, p. 322). However, in Mark 15:27 (the only other place in Mark where the phrase “one on his right and one on his left” occurs), Jesus is described as hanging on a cross between two criminals. Garland (1996) puts it this way: “But the Zebedee brothers are not asking for the honor of being crucified with Jesus. What they really expect is a kingdom for themselves, where they can impose their will on others” (p. 411). Misinterpreting what *messiah* means, the brothers assume that they will rule with Jesus in the coming age (Garland).

38-40: According to Howell (2003), the “cup” which Jesus refers to can be seen as a source of blessing, but it is generally used as a metaphor for God’s wrath and judgment (p. 197). Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman (1998) point out that in the Old Testament, a cup is often used to portray God punishing the wicked by making them drink His wrath (Isa. 51:17; Jer. 25:15-16; Ezek. 23:31-34;

p. 186). Jesus uses this metaphor to signify that He would accept and experience God's wrath on the cross (Matt. 26:39; Howell, 2003, p. 197).

In a similar manner, the metaphor of baptism signifies being overwhelmed by pain and misery. Jesus uses the metaphor here to portray being flooded by the pain and agony of the cross (Isa. 43:2; Ryken, Wilhoit, & Longman, III, 1998, p. 73). The psalmists sometimes used baptism to portray being "plunged" into suffering (Pss. 42:7 and 69:1; Garland, 1996, p. 412). Garland adds that Jesus would not be "sprinkled with a bit of suffering; he will be submerged in it" (p. 412).

41-42: When the other disciples' hear about the brothers' request, they become angry. As Garland (1996) notes, "They are not angry because James and John have been so insensitive to make such a request after Jesus has bared his heart about his coming suffering death. They are angry because James and John beat them to the punch . . ." (p. 412). Since the disciples had argued among themselves earlier over who would be the greatest in the kingdom (Mark 9:33-34), they are now angry that they have missed out (Agosto, 2005, p. 48). Jealousy and envy now spill over into complaining.

Jesus seizes this moment to set the record straight one last time. Instead of arguing over who should be the greatest within the accepted cultural expectations, Jesus introduces them to a radically different model of leadership. The former model is "authoritarian and hierarchal" and follows a transactional approach to leadership, while the latter model focuses on serving one's followers and leads to a more transformational approach to leadership (Howell, 2003, p. 197).

Agosto (2005) summarizes the situation well:

In other words, the disciples should not want leadership in the order of the Empire that oppresses them ("rulers" and "tyrants" who "lord it over them"). Rather, they should be willing to serve the people and in that way become "great." (p. 48)

Verlyn D. Verbrugge (2000) states that "[k]atakyrieuo means to rule over, be master of, or conquer someone It is a characteristic of Gentile rulers to exercise their rule to their own advantage and contrary to the interests and well-being of the people . . ." (p. 325). "Exercise authority over" (katexousiazao) can mean to exercise full authority over someone, to abuse one's authority, or even to tyrannize one's subordinates (pp. 191, 297).

When Jesus talked about Gentile rulers who "lord it over" their subjects, his followers knew exactly what he was talking about. As C. Gene Wilkes (1998) notes, the Gentile approach to leadership is synonymous with the "might makes right" approach: "To lord it over someone means to subject him to your power" (p. 103). Roman examples ranged from forcing Jews to carry their gear for a mile to lining the roadways with crucified victims.

43-44: Jesus turns the disciples' understanding of kingdom leadership

around to confront them with a radical proposal. Instead of “lording it over” others and leading by power and status, Jesus informs the disciples that the greatest leaders in the kingdom will be those who serve others and that anyone who wished to be known as “first among equals” must become the slave of the others.

The term *doulos* meant “slave” and occurs 124 times in the New Testament (Verbrugge, 2000, p. 151). The ancient Greeks considered independence and personal freedom to be among the highest of human rights. Verbrugge observes that “because [slavery] involved . . . the subordination of one’s will to that of another, the Greeks felt revulsion and contempt for a slave; subordination was debasing and contemptible” (p. 152).

The disciples had bought into the reigning cultural leadership model, in which leaders controlled their subordinates through power and authority and in which leadership itself was seen as a vehicle to status and prestige. However, in the kingdom of God, Jesus called His disciples to follow Him instead of the leadership patterns of the world. Rather than relating to their followers as “master” or “lord,” they were called to serve their communities (Ryken, Wilhoite, & Longman, 1998, p. 774).

45: Jesus offers himself as the best example of what being a servant leader looks like. When He states that the Son of Man did not come to be served but to give His life as a ransom for many, He appears to mix two Old Testament designations for a startling result. Howell (2003) notes that “the exalted Son of man of Daniel’s vision was, first, the suffering Servant of Isaiah’s prophecy” (p. 203). “Son of man” was Jesus’ favorite designation for Himself, occurring over 80 times in the Gospels. According to Howell, “the background to the designation ‘Son of man’ comes primarily from Daniel 7:9-14 . . . [in which] ‘One like a son of man’ approaches the throne and is given authority, glory, and sovereign power” (p. 198). Yet by adding that He would give His life as a ransom for many, Jesus evokes the imagery of the fourth servant song of Isaiah, which depicts One who suffers vicariously on behalf of others by offering His life as a ransom for many (p. 199).

Thus, in one unique phrase Jesus combines two powerful images from the Old Testament to indicate that the greatest leader in the kingdom of God is also the greatest servant in the kingdom. Timothy Laniak (2006) describes the outcome like this: “Isaiah is clear about the ironies of biblical leadership: to rule is to serve and to suffer, and to lead is to be *both* shepherd and sacrificial lamb” (p. 129).

Applying Jesus’ Model of Leadership

In response to the brothers’ request, Jesus offers a model of leadership that stood in stark contrast to the leadership models of His day and to those of our day as well. Jesus taught that instead of seeking power and status, His disci-

ples—if they seek greatness at all—should strive to serve others. Unfortunately, however, church history is full of negative examples of how Christian leaders have sought to be first, often with painful results. Even today, when many pastors seek to lead large churches and are often noted for their strong leadership styles, we need to hear and be convicted of Jesus’ call to servant leadership once again (Stein, 2008, p. 489).

Stott (1986) offers three choices that the disciples faced and that Christian leaders face today as well: the choices between selfish ambition and sacrifice, between power and service, and between comfort and suffering (pp. 286-288). In the rest of this section, I will focus on the first two of these choices, after which I will present my own model for servant leadership.

The Choice Between Selfish Ambition and Sacrifice

Stott (1986) notes, “There was, first, the choice *between selfish ambition and sacrifice*” (p. 286, italics original). To be fair, James and John are often castigated for attempting to “get ahead,” yet a certain amount of ambition is necessary for being a successful leader. For example, the “Big Five” model of personality reliably categorizes over 18,000 personality traits into five generally accepted personality “dimensions” (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2001, p. 109). The five major dimensions include *surgency* (dominance, self-confidence, power), *agreeableness* (empathy, collegiality, affiliation), *dependability* (conscientiousness, credibility, or achievement orientation), *adjustment* (emotional stability or self-control), and *intellectance* (openness to experience, imaginative, curious) (pp. 110-112). While different personality traits perform better in different roles, research indicates that people who are higher in dominance and achievement-orientation have higher correlations with job performance than people who score lower in those areas (p. 115).³

The problem does not seem to be with the presence or absence of ambition itself, for the New Testament differentiates between “healthy ambition” and “selfish ambition” (Rom. 15:20; Phil. 1:17). Rather, the problem lies with the goal of the ambition, or as Stott (1986) describes it, *selfish* ambition. Stott notes the following: “Yet the world (and even the church) is full of Jameses and Johns, go-getters and status-seekers, hungry for honour and prestige, measuring life by achievement, and everlastingly dreaming of success” (p. 286). Garland (1996) adds that “many ministers still dream of the big church, of the presidency of an institution . . . , or of being acclaimed in national magazines All too frequently, these people achieve their dreams because of their single-minded purpose to attain them all costs . . .” (p. 416).

³However, Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy note that there is a “compelling body of evidence” that the traits of “surgency, dependability, agreeableness, and adjustment are all related to leadership success,” p. 121.

Both Jesus and Paul would point these high achievers toward a different goal. According to Mark 10:43, Jesus states that leaders who wish to be “great” in the eyes of others must focus on service, not status. Paul, who knew greater achievement than most leaders, considered his previous accomplishments to be useless compared to striving to know Christ (Phil. 3:7-14). In fact, when Paul encountered ministers who preached out of selfish ambition, he commented that the only thing that truly mattered was that Christ was being preached (Phil. 1:15-18).

What might this type of servant leadership look like today? For one thing, we would see fewer ministers striving for larger churches and prestigious positions. If those positions come one’s way, there is no shame in accepting them. However, pastors need to remember that we serve the One who determines our giftedness (1 Cor. 12:4-6) and even our results (1 Cor. 3:4-9). Instead of constantly pursuing a career path that moves ever “upward and to the right,” we should be content in whatever our circumstances (Phil. 4:12-13).

Henri Nouwen (1989) is someone who has demonstrated this model of leadership for today. For 20 years, Nouwen taught pastoral theology and spirituality at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard. As he entered his fifties, however, he realized that serving as a priest in these elite institutions had done little to bring him closer to God. Rather, he believed that “something inside was telling me that my success was putting my own soul in danger” (p. 20). When he asked God for guidance, he felt God calling him to live among the mentally handicapped people of the L’Arche Daybreak community near Toronto. He writes, “So I moved from Harvard to L’Arche, from the best and the brightest, wanting to rule the world, to men and women who had few or no words and were considered, at best, marginal to the needs of our society” (p. 22). While he admits the move was difficult, he also believes God used the “poor in spirit” at L’Arche to heal his own soul (p. 22). One can argue that Nouwen gained a perceived moral authority at L’Arche that enabled him to reach a broader audience than he might have been able to reach had he remained at Harvard.

Servant leaders who choose sacrifice over selfish ambition are not rare, but they are rarely heralded. My own experience makes me believe that for every well-known leader like Nouwen who leaves the limelight for the servant’s towel, there are many more pastors who labor anonymously in small, out-of-the-way settings. Perhaps the greatest reward these pastors will receive is to one day hear Christ say, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” (Matt. 25:21).

The Choice Between Power and Service

As Stott (1986) notes, the leader’s second choice is “*between power and service*” (p. 287, italics original). If the difficulty of choosing between selfish

ambition and sacrifice is hardwired into most leaders, then the difficulty of choosing between power and service also seems to be hardwired into leadership itself. In other words, the practice of leadership naturally involves issues such as power, authority, guidance, and correction. In the words of Aubrey Malphurs (2003), “I suspect that Jesus isn’t speaking out against the leader’s having authority, since leaders must have authority to lead properly” (p. 35). Tom Marshall (2003) adds that “[authority] is an essential attribute of leadership, and leaders cannot function effectively without it . . .” (p. 103).

Marshall (2003) defines power as “the capacity or ability to act or perform effectively . . . and to get done whatever you have to do” (pp. 60-61). Power, from the Greek word *dunamis*, is the ability “to get things done in the face of opposing or defying circumstances” (p. 104). Authority refers to the legitimate right to use power appropriately (p. 105).

Leadership, power, and authority are inextricably connected. In fact, Agosto (2005) writes, “I think questions about the use of authority and power are fundamental to the New Testament experience of leadership” (p. 9). If this correlation is correct, however, how can pastors attempt to balance the roles of “servant” and “leadership” as Jesus commands in Mark 10:35-45? Is the choice really as stark as Stott puts it?

Actually, no. Without defining his terms, Stott (1986) uses the term “power” in a way that emphasizes its negative aspects. To be fair, Jesus describes a similar use of power in Mark 10:42 when He describes Gentile rulers who “lorded” their authority over their subjects. However, we must remember that power and authority are morally neutral. Jesus himself recognizes this fact when He praises the centurion’s discussion of faith and authority in Matthew 8:5-13.

Greenleaf (2008) offers a way forward: “A fresh critical look is being taken at the issues of power and authority, and people are beginning to learn, however haltingly, to relate to one another in less coercive and more creatively supporting ways” (pp. 11-12). He adds that too many leaders practice coercion and manipulation instead of attempting to persuade their followers to arrive at a decision of their own free will (Greenleaf, 1996, p. 129). Rather than Christian leaders emulating secular leaders who force their will on their subordinates as they “lord it over” their followers, servant leaders must lead through moral example, influence, and putting others first (Williams, 2002, pp. 193-194).

In the early church, those who most closely imitated Christ’s life and who were noted for their hard work among the saints gained a moral authority akin to charisma that allowed them to guide and direct congregations (Holmberg, 1980, pp. 195-197). Indeed, Paul ties respect and obedience for leaders to the work they do, not to their office (1 Thess. 5:12-13, 1 Cor. 16:15-16). According to Ferguson (1996), “authority among the followers of Jesus is the moral authority

of those who show the most interest in and do the most in the way of loving service to others” (p. 296). In this sense, Nouwen gained a sense of moral authority through his service to the marginalized at L’Arche, an authority that enabled him to influence millions of people through his writings.

From this understanding of power and authority comes influence, and thereby a picture of how Christians can lead more effectively. Leaders can influence followers best through competence, example, and persuasion rather than position or power. For example, Paul set a tremendous example of spirituality, hard work, and suffering; he also spoke often of his love for his fellow believers. These factors, plus his commission by Christ, gave him tremendous personal power from which he often tried to persuade his congregations to follow his lead. Unfortunately, however, sometimes followers do not respond as required, leaving little recourse except discipline to force them to change. This should not be for the leader’s selfish ends, but for the good of the organization and for the follower’s benefit as well (Ferguson, 1996, p. 296).

A Proposed Way Forward

As He frequently did with much of His teaching, Jesus planted the seed in Mark 10:35-45 for a radically different model of leadership. While modern business writers are embracing servant leadership as put forth in Robert Greenleaf’s writings, Christian leaders seem to vacillate between a strong-willed “CEO” approach and a weak-willed servile approach. Neither of these models is appropriate to ministerial leadership or to Jesus’ teachings, nor do these models have the ability to transform congregations.

I would like to suggest a third way. For Christian leaders to be both biblical and effective, I recommend that they adopt the following guidelines. First, servant leaders must be willing to put Christ’s mission ahead of their own desires for status and achievement. If God seems to be calling pastors to serve in out-of-the-way places, they need to remember that they are called to serve Christ and His church, not themselves. By doing so, pastors can keep a check on temptations that lead to pride and the selfish use of power.

Second, servant leaders must be willing to sacrifice themselves for the mission Christ calls them to. If leaders constantly put the good of the church ahead of their own “rights,” without damaging their health or their families, their followers will be more apt to follow their example. As church members see that a pastor is more focused on God’s glory than on his or her own, the members begin to trust the pastor in more difficult leadership situations. The pastor, in turn, feels less compelled to resort to manipulative techniques that bring strife to the congregation.

Finally, servant leaders must be willing to put the good of the team ahead of

their own welfare. For example, instead of accepting higher salaries and raises as the “perks” of senior leadership, pastors must ensure that their staff members are adequately compensated first. Additionally, rather than approaching the leadership relationship primarily from the perspective of accountability, servant leaders strive to make sure subordinates have the resources to succeed. By doing so, these leaders naturally build stronger teams.

In short, I believe that if Christian leaders constantly seek to put Christ’s mission ahead of their own glory and if they constantly put the good of the group first, then their followers cannot help but be inspired to accept their influence when it is competent and their correction when it is required. Additionally, this type of sacrificial leadership encourages selflessness among other leaders as well. We see this truism demonstrated in the post-resurrection lives of the apostles. Once they observed the true meaning of sacrificial leadership in Jesus’ death on the cross, the issue of who would be the greatest never surfaced among them again.

Conclusion

“Thank you for volunteering to do a third worship service so we can keep our traditional worship service. But, to be honest, we don’t want you to do that! You work so hard and sacrifice so much as it is. If we need to sacrifice our desires to preserve your health, we will.”

After working hard to prepare our congregation to change from a “sandwich” arrangement of a small, traditional worship service followed by an hour of Sunday School and a larger, more contemporary worship service, this woman’s comments were a blessing to my soul. If I had tried to force a decision on the older adults (as well as many of the other segments of our church), our transformation effort would have likely failed as others had before it. On the other hand, had I been content to merely serve the members of our church without trying to lead them, the church would have continued to stagnate as it had done for the previous two decades. Fortunately for us, with the right attitude, a great deal of hard work, and prayer, God blessed our church with a 25% increase in attendance and giving and with a doubling in our annual rate of baptisms.

Will he do the same for your church? Paul reminds us that only God can give the increase—our role is to be faithful servants (1 Cor. 3:1-9). However, I believe that if ministry leaders everywhere put God’s mission and the needs of their ministry ahead of their own desires for achievement and control, not only will we see increased effectiveness among God’s kingdom here on earth but we will experience much more peace as we grow in both service and leadership. Rather than seeking the acclaim of denominational seminaries and leadership journals, may we all strive to hear one day, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” (Matt. 25:21).

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