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J. David Pitcher Jr.

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J. DAVID PITCHER, JR.
**BIBLICAL LEADERSHIP THEMES
OF THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Introduction

The leadership qualities and principles present in the persons recorded by the New Testament authors all emanate from the Lord Jesus Christ. Whether the Lord was washing the feet of the disciples, providing for their physical needs, doing life with them and experiencing exhaustion, antagonisms, and rejection, or laying His life down sacrificially, He set a high standard, leading “not from a position of supreme authority and power,” which He possessed, but from “a voluntarily assumed position of weakness, humility, and vulnerability” (Harris, 2017, p. 361). Under oppressive Roman rule, the Jewish community of the first century was looking for a Messiah who would relieve them from the tyrannical leaders with the command of God Almighty, which would have left the world without a Savior who paid the punishment for sin with His sacrifice of an unblemished life.

Jesus, the sovereign Ruler, built close relationships with twelve men, abandoning “the will to power” (Stacy, 2017, p. 323) that was requested by the sons of thunder (Matt. 20:20–28; Mark 10:35–45; cf. Mark 3:17; Luke 22:24–30). The Creator of the cosmos could have summoned thunder exercising His authority but “the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28, RSV). He came down from heaven, being sent by the Father not to do His own will but to do the will of the Father (John 6:38).

His submissive compassion toward mankind was passed on to the apostles and leaders of the early church as they were empowered by the Holy Spirit. They modeled for us three themes from Jesus—*Among*, *Unsung*, and *God-brung*—that resonate with my own call to leadership.

J. David Pitcher, Jr., MD is a retired orthopedic oncologic surgeon and currently attends seminary at the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University. He is the Academic Director for The Institute of Midrashic Studies in the New Testament. He and his wife of 43 years have two children and four grandchildren. They live in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The *Among* of Leadership

One Wednesday morning while I was staffing the orthopedic tumor clinic at Jackson Memorial Hospital, the county hospital in Miami, I watched a steady stream of medical students, interns, residents, and finally the fellow enter and leave a room. They all confessed that they could not stay in the room. The patient, a prisoner, had a fungating, infected tumor engulfing his foot, and the stench was overwhelming for every trainee. I asked the guard to remove the shackle on the ankle so I could completely get to the wounds. I took the anhydrous alcohol-based hand cleanser and some wound dressings, and over the next half hour I gently applied the cleanser throughout his inflamed foot, asking him over and over if he could feel the coolness, until the pus was completely gone and the smell in the room had dissipated. Throughout that experience I praised God for giving me such a great example in Jesus removing the stench and shackles of sin from my life.

Jesus came down “in person” (Heb. 1:2) and lived among the ones for whom He would lay down His life. One of the first leaders of the early church was Stephen. He is the first person, other than one of the apostles, who is recorded performing miracles (Acts 6:8). And like Jesus, he died a horrific death and yet still had compassion (Acts 7:57–60). To me, the most amazing part of the account is that he didn’t have a stage from which to become a leader in the early church. Luke recorded that “Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8, RSV). He was a people person. He was one of them. He was *among* them. He didn’t set himself higher than the others, having the power of the Holy Spirit and doing “great wonders and signs.” He “was full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5, RSV) and was chosen as a man of good repute to serve not from a platform but among the people. He was a transparent friend of the ones he was serving.

Once this characteristic of *being among* is seen in one person like Stephen, the theme can be seen over and over again in other believers and really can be seen as the first line of the prescription of Christian leadership. Hellerman states that a “relational approach” with a “robust affective component” should exist not only with fellow workers but leaders “should cultivate close relationships with the persons we teach” (2017a, p. 434). Using Paul as a “normative” example, he states, “A pastor who lacks meaningful relationships among persons in his church family seriously compromises the centrality of love in Paul’s demarcation of biblical Christianity” (2017a, pp. 430, 432). To the believers in Corinth, Paul wrote, “Our mouth is open to

you, Corinthians; our heart is wide. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return—I speak as to children—widen your hearts also” (2 Cor. 6:11–13, RSV).

Note the “relational orientation” (2017a, p. 428) of the ministry of Paul when he wrote to the church at Thessalonica, “So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the Gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us” (1 Thess. 2:8, RSV).

The leadership theme of *being among* is one of transparent love and affection toward the ones being served.

The *Unsung* of Leadership

The second theme of leadership recorded within the pages of the New Testament is that of *being unsung*. The example of Jesus again sets the standard for Christian leaders to follow:

Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:3–8, ESV)

Paul wrote those words having been subjected to imprisonment at the Roman colony of Philippi (Acts 16:12, 19–24) when he and Silas “refused to exploit their Roman citizenship” and “[w]illingly suffered the humiliation of flogging and imprisonment with their feet fastened in the stocks at the hands of the Roman magistrates” (Hellerman, 2017b, p. 416). Paul chose not to immediately reveal their Roman citizenship status and avoid the ignominy but instead endured the shame “in service of the . . . Gospel and the fledgling church in Philippi” (Hellerman, 2017b, p. 413). His message to the church at Philippi would have appeared to have an indeterminate message if he had relied on his status “on the part of the missionaries [and] would have generated a two-class system in the church.”

Another example of *being unsung* is that of Barnabas, who was sent to Antioch from Jerusalem when a great number of men from Cyprus and

Cyrene believed in the Lord Jesus (Acts 11:20–22). Barnabas was a native of Cyprus, a Levite who had “sold a field which belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (Acts 4:36–37, RSV). His selfless act is juxtaposed by Luke to that of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11). This same Barnabas came to the defense of Saul after Saul encountered the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus, and when the Jews plotted to kill Saul, Barnabas was among those who sent him in safety to Caesarea and on to Tarsus (Acts 9:23–30).

Barnabas “was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (Acts 11:24, RSV). A great number of people were coming to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ at Antioch. Instead of becoming “the first senior pastor of a Gentile megachurch” (Hellerman, 2017b, p. 419), he “went to Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch” (Acts 11:25–26a, RSV). They ministered together at Antioch for a whole year, and this is where the disciples were called Christians for the first time (Acts 11:26b). Barnabas was a man who did not exploit his position for gain but for the glory of God. It is best summarized by another unsung leader, John the Baptist, who said of Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease (John 3:30, RSV).

The leadership theme of *being unsung* is one of humility and self-sacrifice toward the ones being served.

The God-brung of Leadership

The third theme of leadership recorded within the pages of the New Testament is that of *being God-brung*. The “leader should have a firm conviction that God has placed him into leadership” (Peeler, 2017, p. 493). The supreme example is Jesus. John wrote: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16–17, RSV).

It is God who “has inaugurated the leadership role” (Peeler, 2017, p. 493). Timothy, Paul’s protégé, was admonished to not neglect his gift, “which was given you by prophetic utterance when the council of elders laid their hands upon you” (1 Tim. 4:14, RSV). Luke himself wrote, “Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen” (Acts 28:28, RSV).

He wrote this implying that the work of Paul and indeed his own work of recording the work of God in both the Gospel of Luke and in Acts of the Apostles was not their own but was instituted by God.

“The ultimate goal of all Christian leadership is to draw people toward God” (Peeler, 2017, p. 493). John recorded that Diotrephes “likes to put himself first” (3 John 9, RSV) and reproved him for “having preeminence” (Köstenberger & Crowther, 2017, p. 480). Only “disdain [can] emerge for those who would unduly exalt themselves to a place of illegitimate authority. . . . There is no place for personal exaltation and pride (Köstenberger & Crowther, 2017, p. 480).

Paul recognized that Jesus Christ is the gift giver when he wrote, “And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11–12, RSV).

The leadership theme of *being God-brung* is a recognition that leadership is “God assigned.” “It was the Lord that gave Peter the charge specifically to minister to the Jews and Paul to minister to the Gentiles” (López, 2017, p. 370) as Paul recorded in Galatians 2:7–9.

Conclusion

The easily remembered *among*, *unsung*, and *God-brung* synopsis of themes of leadership within the New Testament summarizes well what the Christian leader is to be.

He is to be *among*, like Stephen, a transparent friend of the ones he was serving with a life-giving love for his constituents and fellow workers and mirroring the actions of Jesus Christ our Savior. In this day and age, it is a most amazing position not to have a platform but to be among those being served, driven by a relational love to those shackled by the chains of sin and those freed from those bonds.

He is to be *unsung*, like Paul and Silas, who sought first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33) rather than their own welfare in order to further the plans for the church in Philippi. And like Barnabas whose *unsung* example served the saints with his gift and led to the salvation of many through his setting himself aside to get Paul involved at the church in Antioch. And do not forget the example of the one crying in the wilderness, John the Baptist, and that of our Lord Jesus who sought the will of the Father and not of his own.

He is to recognize his own position as *God-brung*, as Timothy was reminded and as Paul himself wrote of his own ministry and that of Peter. We are not to be like Diotrephes who had to be reproved by the disciple that Jesus loved. But we are reminded of Jesus, who was sent by the Father because

of His great love for mankind. That should be the firm conviction of the Christian leader, that his own position was inaugurated by God to continue that Great Commission.

These three themes are most important to me as I minister among Orthodox Jews, drawing them into the Jewishness of the New Testament. It is not me that is the focus but the Messiah described within the pages of the letters of Paul, wholly midrashic and wholly theirs. For the reason only God knows, He has brought me from the subspecialized field of orthopaedic oncologic surgery to the field of theology to better minister to them and lead them to the New Testament and the One foretold in the Hebrew Scripture, Jesus the Messiah, Lord and Savior. And the three themes are important to the leaders of this generation, perhaps the last leaders of the church before the return of the King of kings and Lord of lords.

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