

EXPLORING JESUS CHRIST'S LEADERSHIP STYLE: LESSONS FOR AFRICAN LEADERS

MICHEAL BERNARD NYABWARI¹

Article Info

Keywords: Jesus Christ, leadership style, servant leadership, African leaders, New Testament.

Abstract

The article explores Jesus Christ's leadership style as presented in the New Testament and its relevance for African leaders. The authors argue that the world needs leaders who meet physical, spiritual, economic, and political needs of the people, and Jesus' leadership style, characterized by compassion, love, and servant-hood, serves as a guiding principle for leaders in the church and beyond. The paper delves into Jesus' leadership characteristics, including servant-hood, love, and practicality, and compares them to traditional African leadership styles, which exhibit similar features. The article concludes that Jesus' leadership style, which focuses on service and love, is highly needed in Africa, and adopting this style could transform the continent and its people.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership exists in every sphere of life be it social economic or political. It is not a quality endowed to some people and denied to others. Each and every individual has the capacity to lead.

A person may be a leader in some situation and a follower in another. This is because different qualities are usually required for leadership over different groups. As such a member of the subordinate staff in an organization such as a messenger can be a leader in the church while his/her chief executive is just a worshipper without any leadership role in the same church.

Motivating and leading people is an uphill task. It can be frustrating, stressful and dangerous to health even for those who are apparently born leaders. Indeed, there are numerous leaders who have resigned from their offices after just a short time of service due to frustrations they have faced. Such resignations are embarrassing. However, it is better to resign from an office than to mislead people. Inefficient leadership can cause untold suffering and bog down humanity due to lack of clear guidance (Jassy 2001:v).

Reading through the New Testament and especially the Gospels one is impressed by the leadership of Jesus Christ. During his time a small band of twelve disciples submitted themselves to his call to follow him. Judas who was one of the disciples became a traitor and fell out from the group. The remaining eleven disciples turned the whole

¹ Kenyatta University, Kenya

world upside down in later years (Acts 17:6). Evidently this was the fruit of the leadership of Jesus. He had prepared them exceptionally well knowing that they were potential leaders.

The exceptional leadership of Jesus is not only relevant to spiritual leaders but to heads of state who may wish to use their authority for the enrichment and liberation of men. It is also relevant in all other spheres of life. One is therefore persuaded to agree with McAlphine (1982:6) when he argues that Jesus Christ was the greatest leader who ever walked on the earth.

In this paper an attempt is made to discuss how the leadership style of Jesus Christ as presented in the New Testament is applicable in Africa. It has been argued that while most African leaders have failed in their countries. Jesus left an indelible mark in his leadership. Every leader is therefore challenged to look at Jesus Christ and learn from him.

JESUS' LEADERSHIP

During his three years of public ministry, Jesus devoted much of his precious time and attention on the development of the twelve disciples who were to become the leadership core of the earlier Christian community. In spite of this Jesus said surprisingly little to his disciples about their future as leaders. In cases where the disciples quarreled about leadership positions, Jesus refused to dignify their discussion with direct answers. He preferred instead to demonstrate servant-hood. As such the words 'Leader' and 'Leadership' are not mentioned anywhere in the Gospels. This could be the reason why most contemporary biblical writers desist from using Jesus as the model for leadership choosing rather to focus on Moses, David, Nehemiah or Paul (Gunderson 1992:15).

The apparent silence of Jesus in the Gospels regarding leadership does not imply that leadership is a non-biblical concept. Indeed the Bible in both the Old and the New Testaments is clear that God has gifted and called people to lead. The leaders chosen could be old or young. Jesus in particular was thirty years of age when he begun his ministry. By that age most people have reached maturity and decided the course of their life. David, Joseph and Ezekiel equally started to lead when they were thirty. This does not mean that God uses leaders who are thirty years of age and over. Every year, hundreds of young people below thirty years are ordained by various churches worldwide. There are also thousands of youthful leaders in both public and private sector who have been good role models in different parts of the world.

Some people believe that leadership is strictly a gift. They argue that leaders are "just born that way". Conversely, there are people who believe that leadership is a call. They argue that it is a skill to be learned. These two arguments are right to a certain extent but it should be understood that whether leaders are born or made is not useful in any society. What is exceptionally important is the quality of service rendered by those people having leadership roles irrespective of how they were acquired.

It is evident in the Gospels that Jesus preferred to use terms like witness, 'servant', 'salt' and harvest, which are full of implications for the role of a leader (Bennett 1998:2). He also went ahead to show three important aspects concerning leadership. Firstly, leadership is servant-hood, secondly leadership is loving and thirdly leadership is practical. Each of these aspects is discussed below. The three will help us to discern the important lessons that African leaders can learn from the leadership of Jesus.

LEADERSHIP IS SERVANT-HOOD

The New Testament is very clear that leadership is servant-hood. Jesus had no shadow of doubt that God had sent him to serve and not to be served. (Mathew 20:25-28). It was only by being a servant leader that he was able to accomplish the mission, which had brought him to the world. This is the reason why in Christianity service is considered the hallmark of true leadership.

There are various occasions in the Gospels, which prove that leadership is servant-hood. In one occasion seeds of

ambitions began to erupt among the disciples in open competition about the position of authority they deserve (Luke 22: 24-27). Jesus response to their concerns left them bewildered and embarrassed. He did not reprimand them in any way but he cautioned them that whoever wants to be first must place himself last of all and be servant of all. Evidently they least expected such a response.

Jesus was not only a servant-leader but also a good shepherd who was ready to die for his people. However, it is significant that he did not refer to any of his twelve disciples as shepherd during his ministry. It was not until after the resurrection when he spoke to Peter that he commissioned him to be a shepherd. Until that time the emphasis was on the role as 'Sheep'. The important lesson is that Jesus wanted Peter to learn how to be a good follower. This way, he could be trusted to lead. By implications leaders should develop others through discipleship to become leaders as well. In this way, no leader should pretend to lead throughout life arguing that there is nobody else who is competent to take over from him/her.

Jesus also portrayed the role of a leader as a servant when he was about to be betrayed, tried, condemned and crucified. In a picturesque style John 13:1-18) records how he took off his outer garment and tied a towel round his waist, poured water into a basin and knelt down and began to wash the disciples feet and dry them with the towel round his waist. He deliberately did what appeared to be unusual in order to fulfill the servant's role. This way, Jesus did what most leaders today would consider unthinkable.

LEADERSHIP IS LOVING

Gunderson (1992:63) articulates Jesus love in a very convincing language.

Jesus deplored categorizing people according to worldly importance and refused to have anything to do with such a charade. His responses to the Samaritan woman at the well were as sincere and caring as His responses to the wealthy and powerful men with whom He came in contact. Status, whether His own or that of others meant nothing to Jesus. For Him, **agape** love was something to bestow freely upon all men, not just upon those holding places of prominence.

There are no recorded verses in the New Testament when Jesus told someone to go away and mind his own business. However, some people were so difficult that he would have told them so. This testifies that he was a leader who was ready to accommodate those who would otherwise have brought his downfall.

Earlier in the paper we showed how Jesus washed his disciple's feet. Suffice to point out that it was not out of a sense of obligation but out of a heart of sincere love. He demonstrated to them that the way people would be convinced that they were his followers would be their obvious love for one another. It is for this reason that he gave them a vivid instruction, which runs as follows: *A new commandment I give you that you love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another* (John 13:34-5).

The love of a leader has to be witnessed by others. Jesus love in particular was witnessed by the disciples all the time he had been with him. He showed love to different categories of people such as the poor and the oppressed, the lonely and misunderstood, the sick and sorrowing and the outcasts of society

It was because of the same love that he wept over the city of Jerusalem. He also wept at the grave of Lazarus to a point of making people say 'see how He loved him' (John 11:36). Jesus' love for other members of society reveals that leadership without love does not profit. We can therefore fully agree with Paul when he states the following to the Corinthians. *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have no love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have I am nothing* (1 Corinthians 13:1-2).

Briefly therefore true leadership like that of Jesus goes beyond liking people, or showing affection towards people. Leaders must be full of Love.

LEADERSHIP IS PRACTICAL

One of the most common maxims among members of society is "do as I say but not as I do". Applied by the leaders this maxim means that followers must obey leaders without raising any questions. Jesus never used such leadership style. He knew people learn by examples more than words. It is for this reason that he demonstrated that leadership is practical by living what he taught. Jesus was a humble, meek, and loving leader. These are the values he taught his followers to emulate in their leadership styles.

Because Jesus lived what he taught he was able to challenge his accusers to point out any sins he had committed. Knowing that they had nothing they fabricated falsehoods. This is why Pilate testified the excellence of Jesus leadership when he remarked "I find no fault in his man (John 19:6). In view of this, true leaders should be what they teach. They must match words with deeds.

Many times Christians are faced with constant temptation to stray from the ideals of service and use their power to dominate others (see Mathew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-3). Those who hold official positions need to be especially on their guard to see that they use their authority for enrichment and liberation of human beings from sin and its influences.

LEADERSHIP IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

According to Senyonjo (2004), traditional leaders are at the heart of custom and culture in the sense that they play a pivotal role in the day-to-day lives of the people. In Africa, they are regarded as guardians of traditional morals, values and practices that are respected in particular communities from generation to generation. Further, they are viewed as channels through which social and cultural change can be realized. They are also termed as "actors and embodiment of customary decision making institutions" (Blom, 2002).

African traditional leadership made clear expressions of local African social organizations. For instance, the clan elders among the Abagusii of western Kenya attained power and influence over a distinct territory and guided Abagusii on Gusii culture, social values and community aspirations. This was also the case among the Ameru, Akamba and the Agikuyu communities in Kenya.

In Malawi, Chiefs were apparently at the center of the efforts to propagate local governance structures. In the initial stages of colonial rule, chiefs were incorporated into the administrative system as assistants to the district commissioners. In Ghana, some of the chiefs served as such upon being elected by the local government regardless of whether they belonged on not to the ruling clans in their respective communities. In Kenya, chiefs in collaboration with the clan elders formed local courts whose decisions were respected by the government. A survey of African communities confirms that in every country, traditional leaders were highly regarded before and after independence.

African traditional leadership was mainly servant leadership. The leaders did not use their positions for personal gain but for the community. Examining the roots of servant leadership among leaders in traditional South Africa, Nelson (2003) notes that traditional South African leaders were guided by love, value for each other, commonness and respect for humanity. Generally, African traditional leaders viewed fellow tribesmen as either members of the nucleus or extended family. This made leaders to believe that the actual goal of leadership was serving members of either the nuclear or extended family.

The African servant Leadership was based in customary law systems. The system was well organized and had structures which worked well with people since time immemorial. The colonial masters interfered with this system in most African countries. With enticements, the traditional leaders were co-opted by colonial powers to govern especially in rural areas. New legislative and administrative structures were developed which undermined the objectives of traditional leadership. Leaders created by the colonial government abused the African traditional

leadership by adopting leadership styles which were foreign and questionable among Africans. The problem has continued in Africa

The above shows that the traditional African leadership style and that of Jesus Christ complement one another. In traditional Africa, a leader had to be a loving and practical servant of the people. This servant leadership is what is absent in the contemporary Africa as seen in the subsequent discussion.

LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA STATES

Leaders have always been there in Africa. In indigenous African Communities the most common view of themselves was of a "father" whose duty it was to see to the well being of all his "children". They generally considered their role as one of service. Many people saw their leaders to be in authority by divine right. The leaders were expected to serve them faithfully and well and bring blessing and honour to their community.

With the advent of colonialism some community leaders wanted to become masters over the people they served. This has continued to be observed today in various African states even with the attainment of independence. There is every reason to be concerned with such leaders because human government springs from God's nature. The political system in power is therefore the institution God is using to reveal authority in civil affairs. Thus the appointed leaders are ultimately responsible to God.

The scriptures don't recommend any particular type of secular government, but have a lot to say about the responsibilities and accountability of national leaders. This remains true whether they are dictators or democratically elected. Democracy itself has no particular biblical support. Righteous government of any kind most certainly does.

In Africa, most of the governments cannot be considered as righteous. This is because their leaders hardly practice the principles of leadership, which Jesus utilized to make his ministry a success. The leaders do not seem to be determined to protest against manifest social evils and injustice and help correct them. Instead they have concentrated power in their hands. They use it to buy or reward loyalty either financially or by appointment to lucrative positions in public institutions, regardless of the appointees competence, and to deny economic opportunities to those they consider to be disloyal. Indeed the leaders convert public property and public institutions to their own use in a quest for political survival. They lead like the Gentile rulers whom Jesus said lord it over them, and their great men make their authority felt. (Mark 10:42-44).

Kinoti (1978:28) points out that some countries such as Uganda under Milton Obote and Idi Amin, Ethiopia under Mengistu Haile Mariam, Somalia under Mohammed Siad Barre, and Central African Republic under Jean Bedel Bokassa and Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda and Liberia under a succession of Military rulers-suffered more than others. He is however quick to point out that nearly every African country had its share of repression and other consequences of autocratic rule. Similar views are also shared by Hyness (1996) who has shown how different ruling African leaders have enriched themselves and their relatives and their communities at the expense of the economy. There is no doubt that this poor leadership and greed is the one that has led to severe conflicts within states. Such is the situation in Somalia today. It has been the main cause of the serious poverty that cuts across the various African states.

The picture we have drawn above is a sad one hence Africa desperately needs a new type of leaders who do not seek their own glory. The new leaders should have a genuine concern for and commitment to the well being of their fellow citizen. People must be convinced of the integrity of their leaders. They must be able to trust them. They must be able to feel that their interests are safe in their hands.

THE RELEVANCE OF JESUS' LEADERSHIP STYLE IN AFRICA

It is instructive from the New Testament that Jesus was interested in constructing a more humane world in which

his followers and he could live a better life. This is the very opposite of what most African heads of state are interested in as shown earlier. In this regard, Africa is in need of servant leaders, leaders who are loving and leaders who are practical.

African heads of state must be humble if they are to be accepted as servant-leaders. Jesus was such a humble leader that his disciples were amazed to see him wash their feet. He even went a head to severely rebuke the Pharisees for wearing broader phylacteries taking the places of honour, being greeted obsequiously and having people call them rabbi. (Mathew 23:5-7). The lesson here is that no African leader should view any person as incidental. They should utilize every opportunity to express Christ likeness with no preference given because of status, position, gender, ethnicity or denominational affiliation. Such considerations have been the cause of the many problems facing Africa today.

The leadership of Jesus reveals that the work of a true leader is to serve the interest of his followers. This means that African leaders must be a dedicated people who follow the right means. They should have an open line of communication the way Jesus had with his disciples. In this case information should flow from the leader to the followers and vice versa. The people should not be mere 'yes men' of the leader but his friends and confidant. Domination of subjects as reported in various African countries may be easy but it provides only mechanical compliance and little else except general discontent. This is why Jesus stated the following to his disciples. *No longer do I call you servants because the Servant does. But I have called you friends because all things that I have heard from my father I have made to you (John 15:15).*

Christ did not wish to use his authority for his own personal ambition as many of our African leaders do. African leaders should therefore learn that a true and honest leader loves his people and is ready to serve them as a friend even at the cost of his own life. This is the only way that people can believe that the leaders are not using their authority for their own personal ambition. Leaders attracted by position expose themselves by their partiality and favoritism. This is a violation of the royal law of Love (James 2:8-9).

Studies in Sociology have confirmed that all human beings learn most readily by observing role models. In view of this African leaders should place the utmost priority in being a living demonstration of the relationship between verbal instruction and day-to-day life. They should not discourage such vices as corruption when they are corrupt themselves. They should also not pretend to be building nationhood when they are practicing ethnicity and nepotism. Jesus did not preach one message to the disciples while secretly living another. Rather, he lived like they did. There was no instance when Jesus violated his integrity by using one standard for his followers and a lesser standard for himself. There was always direct relationship between Jesus personal lifestyle and the lifestyle he encouraged his followers to live.

African leaders who want to make an impact on other people's lives must imitate Jesus leadership style by matching words with deeds. They should lead by example and invite others to scrutinize their lives. The problem in Africa today is that although the African leaders are stressing the need for accountability, they want to apply it down ward to those under them. They conveniently ignore any application to their lives. This is why Gunderson (1992) argues that a leader cannot sustain a modeling relationship for long if he is a phoney. He believes that a follower can tolerate flawed reality but not phoney perfectionism. It is therefore evident that African leaders should not discourage such vices as corruption when they are corrupt themselves. They should also not pretend to be building nationhood when they are practicing ethnicity and nepotism. African leaders will not be considered as effective until their words correspond with their deeds.

CONCLUSIONS

Human beings kind cannot do without leaders. History is in fact a record of the leaders and the led. There are as

many kinds of leaders as there are ways of acquiring leadership. The Bible is very clear that a nation will fall if it has no guidance (Proverbs 11:14). This implies that good leaders are required in order to safeguard the well being of their societies. Jesus was one such leader whose leadership style deserves to be emulated. He revealed three important things regarding leadership. Firstly, a leader is a servant of the people and not a King who rules over them. Secondly, a leader not only shows affection towards the people but loves them in a manner that could be witnessed by others. Thirdly a leader is not theoretical but practical. Stated otherwise a leader is a model who serves by words and example.

Jesus' leadership style is lacking in Africa. Most of the leaders have been interested with their own welfare. They do not have a well developed sense of Spurpose and direction. As such they cannot be considered as 'good shepherd'. This means that the church should conscietize the leaders on the need of adapting the leadership style of Jesus.

REFERENCES

- Bennett, D.W (1988) *Leadership images from the New Testament. A practical Guide*. Carlisle: O.M Publishing.
- Blom, A (2002). *Ambiguous Political Space: Chiefs, Land and the Poor in Zimbabwe*. Newyork. Zed Books.
- Gunderson, D. (1992) *Through the Dust*. Seattle: YWAM Publishing
- Heney, D. (1998) *Concrete leadership strategies for pastors, Administrators and Lay Leaders*. Virginia: Resource Publication, Inc.
- Hyness, J. (1996) *Religion and Politics in Africa*: East Africa Publishers Limited.
- Jassy M.F.P (2001) *Leadership*, Eldoret AMECEA Gaba Publications.
- Kaitholil G. (1994), *Make leadership your target*, Bombay: Better yourself Books.
- Kinoti, G. (1994), *Hope for Africa and what can a Christian do*, Nairobi: Africa Institute for Research and Development.
- McAlpine C. (1982), *The leadership of Jesus*, Tonbridge: Sovereign World Ltd.
- Nelson, L. (2003). "An Exploration Study of the Application and Acceptance of Servant Leadership Theory among Black Leaders in South Africa". In B.E Winston and C. Bekker *Similarities between Ubuntu And Servant Leadership: Building A Platform For Servant Leadership In South Africa*. Norfolk. IAMC
- Senyonjo, J. (2003). *Traditional Institutions*. London. Zed Books