

JESUS' LEADERSHIP SYMBOLS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERS

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ABSTRACT: Jesus' Leadership Symbols and its implications for
Christian leaders delve into the symbolic representation of the
basin, the water, and the towel which Jesus used to exemplify
servant leadership to his disciples in John 13:1-17. The writers
used deductive biblical interpretation method coupled with
secondary sources such as books, journals, commentaries to
make inferences for Christian Leaders. The servant leadership
as portrayed by Jesus in the passage has symbolic connotations
for contemporary leadership which the writers were able to
justify through theoretical and practical experiences in
leadership positions at the church, denominational, and
institutional levels. From the deductive interpretation of the
passage, it was revealed that the bowl represented God from
which the water of life was drawn, the water represented the
living word of God that cleans, sanctifies; and the towel
represented the finishing work of the Holy Spirit in Spiritual
cleansing. Hence the article revealed that, for contemporary
Christian leaders to truly demonstrate servant leadership
portrayed by Jesus, they should submit for spiritual cleansing
through discipleship, retreat, daily devotion and intentional
Bible Study; they should be able to acknowledge God-factor in
their leadership positions, platforms, and opportunities; they
should accept the significant role of Jesus as the foremost

servant leadership and model their leadership practices after him; they should adequately feed on the word of God and strive to live piteously for consistent cleansing; they should appropriate the powerful role of the Holy Spirit in their leadership practices to guide, guard, and grind out excesses or dross from their lives; and they must keep stewardship watch over potential leaders.

Keywords: *Leadership, Symbols, and Christian Leaders*

Introduction

The desire to have better leaders in the church and nations' affairs is insatiate. This singular fact informs the passion for promoting ideals of leadership through various models, including academic writing. The paper therefore, out of the observations of the writers was a burden to further analyse the symbolic leadership acts of Jesus in the book of John 13:1-17. This particular text has been explored by many researchers and the lessons from the text have been applied to both the church leadership as well as the secular leadership. However, the writers pay more attention to the symbolic representation of objects used in this passage as it applies to Christian leadership. Achieving this purpose, the writer clarified the concept of Leadership and Christian leaders in the context of this paper; explore a deductive biblical interpretation approach to the book of John 13:1-17; make some biblical inferences from the passage, and drew implications from the inferences as it applies to Christian leadership practices.

Conceptual Clarifications

The writers clarify the following concepts for the purpose of understanding them in the context of this paper. First, leadership as a field of study has been explored by people from various life endeavours; from local to the international levels. In fact, the application of its principles and practices cut across every religions of the world. Hence, leadership becomes non-stop music that must be sung and rehearsed to have its practice appropriately from one generation to another. Few among the submissions of scholars on this concept include Janvier and Thaba's submission that leadership is both people and programme because a leader works with people, responsible for them, accountable to them, and also responsible for the programme

(running) of the institution, church, or organization (2014,16). Ishola (2024:23) simply opines that “to have proper understanding of the concept of leadership, it must be viewed from a local perspective which holds that father is the leader for the entire family; mother is also a leader for the children, while every child in the home too has leadership responsibility attached to their positions in the family.” James C. Georges in the word of John C. Maxwell describes leadership as the process of obtaining followers (1993:1). These followers are to champion the course of moving the organization to the desired level. Ultimately, no one can claim to be leading when no one seems to be following him/her.

Consequently, upon the submission of some scholars above, leadership can be described to be all-encompassing; it runs through people whom Maxwell refers to as followers, to the family, and through the programmes that must be executed to achieve goals and objectives. Furthermore, the writers of the paper would like to describe leadership as a process of moving people called followers through natural and godly influencing power of the leader towards achieving the set goals for an institutions, organizations, family, and nations at large. This makes leadership to be more spiritual than social activities as the leaders unfold the mind of God and spur the followers to corporate towards reaching and realizing it (Weems 1993:22). Therefore, understanding the spirituality of leadership and its symbolical entity as revealed in John 13: 1-17 becomes the spotlight of this paper.

Secondly, “Christian leaders” as a concept is a combination of two important words which are Christian and Leaders. The former qualifies the later. This implies that there are leaders of different calibers, character, religion, and ideologies. However, there are leaders that are Christians in principles and practices. Hence, Christian leaders can be described as individuals who have confessed the Lord Jesus as their savior and piloting the leadership affairs of people in their care with biblically, spiritually, and godly driven principles. Ultimately Christian leaders exemplify Jesus model of leadership as seen in several pages of the scripture. One of such passages is the focus of this paper.

In other words, where there is Christian leadership, the leader who is seen as servant uses his influencing power towards moving the followers to achieve God’s given

agenda. Christian leadership is not limited to the confines of the church building or Christian environment alone; all Christians are meant to be lights of the world and salts of the earth that influence their spheres (Abegunde and Ishola 2023:8). Other synonyms for Christian Leadership include Servant Leadership, spiritual leadership, and biblical leadership. Hence Christian leadership entails casting god’s given vision for an organization, secular or religious; communicating such in a concise and clear manner such that members of the organization embraces; and moving the members of the organization to contribute meaningfully towards achieving that vision.

Furthermore, the practicality of Christian leadership largely depends on the leaders. Leaders who will be able to model Christian leadership must be ready to bear the responsibility of letting people seeing those principles work in their lives first. Just like Jesus would say. That which you see me doing, do it unto others. Also, Apostle Paul, one of the transformational leaders in the New Testament categorically made an assertion which is significant to this topic. He says: *follow me as I follow Christ* (I Corinthians 11:1). The statement implies that any leader who claims to be Christian has Christ as his/her leader who guides, and dictates what should be done per time in the church or in any organization one may be leading. However, such a leader does not worth following again whenever people could not march his/her words with his life.

Deductive Interpretation of John 13: 1-17

The narration about Jesus, washing the feet of his disciples runs through John 13: 1-17. However, the writers would like to limit the interpretation and applications of the passage to verses 5, and 12 to 17. The chosen verses are given below as curled from the New International Version.

After that, he (Jesus), poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. v5
When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. ‘Do you understand what I have done for you?’ he asked them. You called me “Teacher” and “Lord”, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash

one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. V12-17.

Summary, the last supper took place before the washing of the disciples' feet and its theme was of love. There, Jesus demonstrated that by personally washing his disciples' feet which is a courtesy usually performed by a menial servant. At that instance, Peter objected but Jesus insisted (Richards 2004:690). The act of foot washing was symbolic of spiritual cleansing as well as a model of the attitude believers are to adopt towards one another. Richards (2004:690) further explicated the passage thus:

The courtesy (Foot washing) was appreciated in the Middle East, where sandal shod feet became dirty walking dusty streets. Usually feet were washed by a servant. The disciples were uncomfortable that Jesus, the Lord, would take this role and wash their feet. Jesus was speaking symbolically. The bath represents the cleansing of the whole person by the inner transformation faith in Jesus' accomplishes.

Richards argues that most conservative scholars see symbolic link between foot washing and the believers' need for continual cleansing from sin committed as she walks through life. This is the position of the writers of this paper. In support of this is the assertion of Apostle Paul "Sanctify them by the word, thy word is truth." Thus, the bath represented conversion while foot washing implies confession of daily known and unknown sin.

Furthermore, exploring the background event following the passage, Dickson (2017:1291) asserts that the disciples were thinking Jesus would be their earthly king who would establish his reign in Jerusalem; and consequently deliver the nation of Israel from the Roman Government. Thus, from this perspective were the thoughts of the disciples on leadership originated from. Little wonder Jesus had to exemplify and teach correct perspective to Christian Leadership. Even with this analogy, many of the disciples were still left clueless regarding what he was driving at. Affirming the

position of Richards on verse 5, Dickson (2017:1291) reiterates that the disciples were still finding it difficult to correlate feet washing as a model for authentic leadership from Jewish religion angle. This was because the exercise used to be the responsibility of the slave and servants, but not kings. They kept mute as Jesus proceeded to wash their feet from one person to another.

On verses 10 to 15, Dickson (2017:1291) has the following to say:

The disciples were clean because they have submitted to Jesus' word. "You are clean through the word that I have spoken to you." (However), Judas was not clean because he did not have the spirit of submission to the words of Jesus. From the time Jesus had called Judas into discipleship, he knew that Judas would betray him. Nevertheless, on this occasion Jesus washed his feet. Jesus (thereafter) explained the lesson of the illustration. They understood the custom of washing feet. Jesus was not, therefore, insulting foot washing as a practice to be kept among his disciples. What he was illustrating, however, must be understood among the disciples for it will explain the very nature of the godly behavior He brought into the world.

(Prior to this time), the disciples had exalted Jesus to be their leader because such was the position of teachers in the culture. (In fact) they had exalted Jesus beyond the position of Teachers. They affirmed that He was their Lord, thus making themselves his servants. If the one they exalted to such a high position washed their feet, then Jesus assumed that they could understand that they should serve one another. If the Teacher and the Lord bowed to serve them, then they as students and servants should not think themselves too proud to do the same to one another. If any man would be a Christian, therefore, he must be willing to do the same. There will be no one in heaven that does not have a dirty towel from the washing of the feet of men. The example was not the Jewish custom of washing feet. The example was to bow down to the spiritual and physical needs of one's brother in Christ and service. "Whoever desires to become great among you will be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first must be slave of all" (Mark 10: 43-44).

Gleaning from the submission of Roberts (2004) and Dickson (2017), the writers submit that the passages revealed several truths guiding Christian leadership and discipleship practices. For the purpose of the paper, the following truths were deductively implied from the passage as it related to the principles and practices of Christian leadership which is the subject matter of this paper.

Foremost, the passage implies submission and act of being settled for the cleansing. Jesus would have forced any of the disciples to settle for feet washing. This truth was clearly revealed in Jesus' discourse with Peter who thought it was not right for Jesus, the Lord and Master to wash his feet. Jesus had to respond that unless he submitted himself for the exercise he had no part with in the kingdom. This response should raise a significant question of how important this exercise was to Jesus. The importance attached to it actually made all the disciples to settle for this exercise, including Judas Iscariot who eventually betrayed Jesus. Hence, to be part of Jesus, all the disciples were enjoined to settle down and submit for feet washing.

In the same vein, the bowl represented God from which the water of life was drawn. From several passages of the New Testament, Jesus was revealed as the living water. In fact, Jesus proclaimed himself to be one (John 4:14). Therefore, the writers would like to portray the basin which holds the water as the living God from whom the living water comes. The water can only be as clean as the container. Hence, since the God Almighty is without blemish, the water that flows from such source cannot but be clean and be used for spiritual cleansing.

Also, the water represented the living word of God that cleans, and sanctifies. The Bible says, sanctify them by your words, your word is truth (John 17:17). Only the pure words of life can sanctify, porch, and purify every sinful soul to make them fit for divine assignment. The disciples of Jesus were exposed to the sanctifying water of life (Jesus), who challenged their sinful ways; confronted several of their wrong assumptions and positions. The water equally removes every entanglement of the Pharisees and Sadducees ideology. By and large, two critical importance of water are for drinking and for washing. Hence, Jesus serves these purposes in the life of his disciples.

The towel represented the finishing work of the Holy Spirit in Spiritual cleansing. After Jesus had washed the feet of His disciples with the water drawn out of the basin, he removed the towel from his side and dry their feet with the towel. By implication, the towel is to perfect the work of water. The water is to wash the dirt, while the towel is to clean the leg to make it dry and fit for another journey. Jesus himself promised the Holy Spirit who will remind believers everything that Jesus had taught and at the same time help them do the work of teaching, consoling, comforting, and challenging. The perfecting work of the Holy Spirit cannot be over emphasized as it prepares believers for a renewable Christian journey. If any of the disciples was washed and refused to be dried with towel, such an individual has limited space to cover before the feet become dirty again. This understanding substantiates the inevitability of the towel.

Implications for Christian Leaders

From the interpretation of the passage, the following implications are been drawn for church leaders, Christian leaders in every sector, and for denominational leaders:

Every Christian leader should submit for spiritual cleansing through discipleship, retreat, daily devotion and intentional Bible Study. The writers put forward that total submission to the dictate of Jesus is a mark of Spiritual maturity. A leader who is still struggling with submission for spiritual cleaning reveals the immaturity in his/her walk with the Master. Little wonder, Apostle Paul says, any individual who aspires for the position of leadership in the church must not be recent convert (I Timothy 3:6). This progressive experience is what Eugene (2019:71) called sanctification through the word of God and through the blood of Jesus. Every Christian leader need not be coarse to always submit for daily, monthly and yearly spiritual cleansing through personal and corporate retreat, lifelong discipleship with Jesus under their guidance of trusted and more matured men of God. Some Christian Leaders seems to have overgrown the stage of been checked by another men of God. The Bible further notes that Iron sharpens iron. Hence, the supervisory role of respected and matured men of God whom contemporary Christian leaders can submit to for spiritual leadership, guidance, chastisement, encouragement cannot be over emphasized.

Furthermore, every Christian leader should be able to acknowledge God-factor in their leadership positions, platforms, and opportunities. There is no gain saying that some Christian leaders raised by God for a particular assignment are losing sight of the personality that has brought them to the position of authority. Many of them are quick at forgotten their humble background. There are many examples of such leaders in the Bible. Among them is Nebuchadnezzar the king who thought he had built a kingdom/empire by his own hand and nobody could remove him as recorded in (Daniel 4:29-30). Saul was also disposed of his kingship rope when he started becoming arrogant and felt threatened by God ordained leader. Little wonder, God raise a replacement from under his watch (I Samuel 13:14). Also, Solomon the last king that reigned over the entire nation of Israel at a point abandoned the king of Kings out of his flair for many strange women (I Kings 11). Most of the king that reigned after Solomon equally fell into the same sin committed by him. Of course, the resultant effect was felt upon the entire inhabitant of the land. Therefore, It is costly for every Christian leader who enjoyed the grace of being raised by God to occupy any leadership position whether in the religious or secular circle to forget God who brought them to that position of authority.

Additionally, Christian leaders should accept the significant role of Jesus as the foremost servant leadership and model their leadership practices after him. Ishola and Ishola (2023:374) opine that servant leadership has to do with giving attention to the needs of the followers by the leader and consequently responding to solve those needs. In the passage under consideration, the spiritual cleaning of the disciples was the utmost priority of Jesus. Servant leadership which Jesus portrayed in the passage hold several significant for contemporary Christian leadership as it embodies component such as stewardship, obligation, partnership, emotional healing, and elevating purpose (Johnson 2018:307). Hence, Christian leaders should act on behalf of the followers to represent their interest without any bias; view all their assignment as very urgent; treat followers as equal fellow in terms of justice in the distribution of power; respond to the followers' disappointment, trauma, hardship, and broken relationship by first showing empathy and listening to them; and by paying attention to the vision casted (Johnson (2018); Sullivan (2004).

Moreover, Christian leaders should adequately feed on the word of God for consistent cleansing. The Psalmist posits that “Sanctify them by your word.” This passage implies that for every Christian leader to be rid of worldly entanglements there is the need to consistently ponder on and apply the word of God into their lives and into their leadership practices. The cleansing ultimately comes through obedience to the divine instructions (Adetunji 2010:70). Efficacy of pondering on the word of God cannot be over emphasized for it is out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. Thus, when Christian leaders are loaded with biblical principles, such would be the guidance for their leadership practices in every organization, whether secular or religious. The importance of feeding on the word of God will not only affect the leadership practices of Christian leaders, it would have a far reaching impact on their personal life.

Likewise, Christian leaders should appropriate the powerful role of the Holy Spirit in their leadership practices to guide, guard, and grind out every excesses or dross. Leadership has three important roles to play in the lives of the followers irrespective of the organization. First is to guide which has to do with providing the followers with the right vision for which they can jointly run after to make an organization better. Adetunji (2010:131) submitted that unless the human elements of a church are motivated by, submitted to, guided, and governed by the Holy Spirit, there is no right way to administer (lead) the church. The second role is to guide organizational policies towards ensuring its effective compliance on the part of the members of the organization. The last is to ensure that rules and regulations as well as proper disciplinary measures are applied to individuals who acted against the organizational policies. Achieving these three for Christian leaders could be difficult unless one has gained a spiritual control over those people. Excess in the lives of the followers can be addressed more effectively with the power of the Holy Spirit who determines certain disciplinary measures that fits each individual. Experientially, in the church context, there are some members who have been disciplined but instead of that discipline to redirect them back to God, it leads them totally astray. Also, in the secular organization, when a staff err and could not be disciplined appropriately; such a staff might become bad omen for the organization.

Lastly, every Christian leader must keep stewardship watch over potential leaders (Charge, call attention, encourage, rebuke, and praise). Just like Jesus kept a spiritual watch over his disciples by prioritizing their physical and spiritual cleansing, this should motivate contemporary leaders to understand what spiritual leadership entails and to strive to attain the standard set by Jesus. There is no gain saying that several leaders have little or no roles that they are playing in the lives of their followers. More leaders are becoming parasites on their followers by feeding on their wealth. Jesus, the ultimate example for Christian leadership charged, called to attention, encouraged, rebuked, and praised his followers. These stewardship roles consequently made his disciples to be loyal and committed to his course. Therefore, contemporary Christian leaders are enjoined to take seriously their stewardship assignment over their followers.

Conclusion

The paper has successfully provided Christian leadership model from the book of John 13:1-17 and has applied the principles therein to Contemporary Christian leaders. Leadership in Nigeria can become better as leaders understand their primal position in moving people to fulfill God's agenda. One of the ways to fully discharge leadership roles effectively irrespective of the organization one may be leading is to discover biblical principles that guide the operation of Christian leadership. This understanding and the desire on the part of the leaders to apply them would significantly change the negative tones of leadership been sung by many in the church, in the society, and the nation at large. Summarily, the significant roles of God (Basin/holder), Jesus (Water/Word), and the Holy Spirit (Towel/Renewal) should be promoted more among Christian leaders at all levels. Their total dependent on the Trinity would make them more productive in life and in their respective leadership positions.

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